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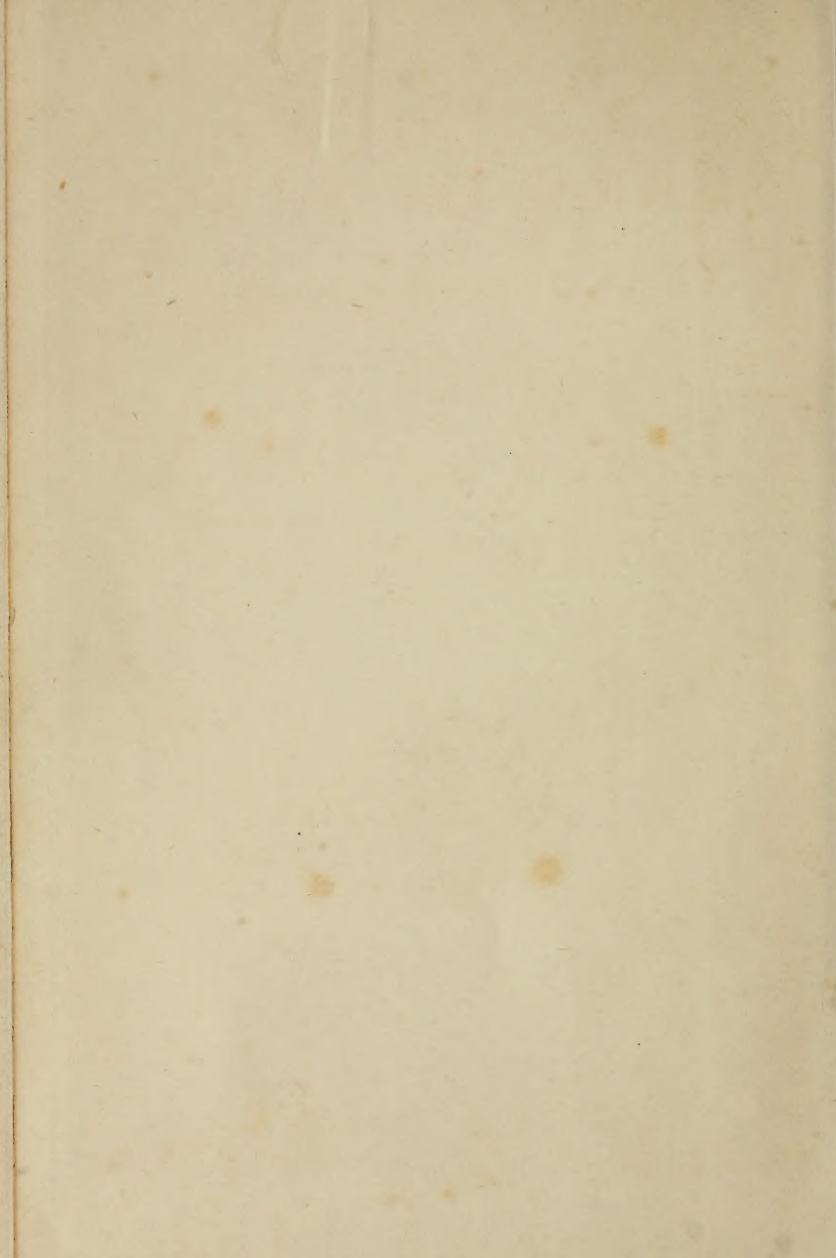
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THE
FERRY OF FATE

A TALE OF RUSSIAN JEWRY

BY
SAMUEL GORDON

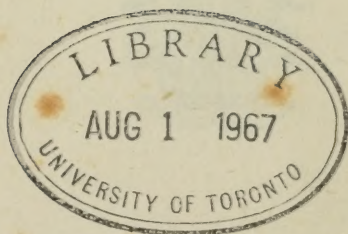
AUTHOR OF "A HANDFUL OF EXOTICS," "SONS OF THE COVENANT,"
"LESSER DESTINIES," ETC.



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THE FERRY OF FATE

CHAPTER I

NYMAN LICHTENBERG rose from his seat by the table and ensconced himself on the window-sill, not because he felt impatient, but merely because the light was giving out in the attic. As it was, he could not see anything of the pavement from his sixth-storey altitude, and his prospect beyond was hemmed in narrowly by the houses opposite—bald, barrack-like buildings of the type abounding in the Odessa working quarter, where its teeming thousands herded together within the least available space and with the lowest degree of comfort. For two years Nyman had lived in this attic, with Baruch Volkmann for his room-mate, and as he sat crouching there on the window-ledge, his eyes glued on the well-thumbed Horace, there was nothing in his manner or expression to show that he was face to face with a crisis that threatened his future with a cataclysm of disaster.

A queer, ungainly figure he made with his undersized body, stumpy almost to dwarfishness, his great breadth of shoulders, abnormal for a young man in his early twenties, the whole set upon a pair of short

sturdy legs with feet ridiculously large. Nor was there anything in his face to redeem the uncouth figure. The low, beetling forehead, the high cheekbones, and the small Calmuk eyes made one doubt his Semitic origin. The massive under-jaw showed strength, but gave to the features their final touch of disproportion.

The light waned more and more until Nyman had to desert his perch and move back to the table. There he lit a copek tallow candle, and presently he was again draining spectre goblets of golden Falernian, and chasing some elusive Daphne through the shady groves of the Aventine. He was still trying to persuade himself that he really did not feel impatient. But finally he had to own up to at least a certain degree of anxiety. It was quite eight o'clock now, and Baruch, or Boris, as the Russianised form of his Christian name figured on the University register, had gone out shortly after the midday meal. And the errand on which he had gone lent itself easily to surmises of evil happenings. There were desperate spirits among the students under ban of expulsion, and Baruch himself was not the least phlegmatic of them. Gradually but surely Nyman's attention detached itself from the printed page and fixed upon the scene he pictured outside the Senate House, where the three score students whose fate hung in the balance had gone to learn the result of their petition. Nyman himself had not gone. His name was on the list of those proscribed, but he reasoned that until he had been handed his "exeat"

he had still the right to consider himself a member of the University. And as long as he was still a student it was his business and his privilege to study and not to attend demonstrations.

"Eheu fugaces . . ." He made another attempt to immerse himself, but he sat up with a sigh of relief when a few minutes later he heard Baruch Volkmann's eager steps storming up the top flight of stairs. Nyman rose slowly, his hand pressed to his side, for his heart was beating furiously. For all his stoicism could not make him forget the great issue that hung upon the next moments.

"Good news, Nyman, good news," shouted Baruch, bursting in and gripping the other by both shoulders. "They have considered the petition. We are to be allowed an appeal to the Prefect. There is hope, Nyman !"

Nyman stood still for an instant and then stepped back. It was not so much to signify his disappointment at the message as to give himself a better opportunity for envisaging the messenger. Yes, Baruch Volkmann—Nyman admitted it without the least tinge of jealousy—was worth looking at. There were few, men or women, who did not turn to look after him as he passed. Few, too, would have guessed that this magnificent young specimen of manhood was not the scion of a long line of rulers among men, but the offspring of the round-shouldered little mechanic and his shrivelled drudge of a helpmeet, fighting their grim battle for life in that tumble-down hovel away in the Pale of Settlement

—fighting and always, always losing. By some law of heredity Baruch Volkmann perhaps reproduced in himself the type of some far distant ancestor, symbolizing the recuperative force of his race, which, after generations of gradual decline, suddenly makes the degenerate stock shoot out into new branches of beauty and strength. Limb for limb, feature for feature, Baruch Volkmann had been cast in an heroic mould and in lines of rigorous precision, as though Nature, roused to her mettle by a long spell of failure, had wished to give herself a consummate proof that her hand had not lost its cunning.

With a smile that gave the lie to his fierceness, Baruch shook his fist at Nyman.

"Dolt—idiot—wet blanket—is that all the thanks I get from you?" he cried.

"I wish I had some thanks to give you," replied the other, dryly.

"What, isn't it enough for you to have obtained so much? Imagine! We are to be allowed an appeal to the Prefect. We are each to be permitted to state our case to him, singly and individually, to show our credentials, our testimonials, our records. Golgofski can be trusted to treat us fairly. He has the reputation of being liberal-minded, progressive——"

"Probably he also has something else."

"What do you mean?"

"His instructions."

Baruch stared at him, nonplussed, waiting for him to proceed.

Nyman broke into a bitter laugh.

"There were sixty of you, and not one had the sense to see through it! Upon my word, you fully justify the Senate in the pretext it has set up for our expulsion. How did it run? That 'having regard to the excessive calls on the energy of the teaching staff and the limited accommodation, it has been deemed advisable to dismiss some of the less promising among the Jewish students.' Oh, the pack of fools you are!"

"Yes, and I am a greater fool than all the rest," said Baruch, nettled.

"Isn't it all of a piece with their usual policy?" continued Nyman, ignoring the interruption. "Barbarian methods disguised as the operations of twentieth-century law and order. Nothing matters as long as appearances are kept up!"

"Nothing matters as long as you talk sense!" Baruch shouted back at him.

"Very well, then, I shall talk sense," said the other, quietly. "The harder a man's case, the more easily he lets himself get lured into a fool's paradise. You are staking your hopes on the appeal to the Prefect. What does the concession really mean? What but that the Senate, in expelling us, wishes to make it appear—and it's we ourselves who have afforded them the means of doing so—to make it appear that we have been given every chance. The Prefect, liberal and progressive as he is, will do nothing. He will say he cannot override the ruling of the Senate. The Senate will thrust the responsibility back on the Prefect for refusing to override their ruling. The

responsibility will be bandied backwards and forwards, till in the end no one will be responsible. We shall have been treated with every consideration—but we shall remain expelled.”

Baruch's fist came down heavily on the table.

“You croaking raven! Why do you tell me this?”

“Why shouldn't I tell you?” asked Nyman, calmly.

“Because sufficient for the day will be the evil thereof. I should at least have had one more happy night. The others don't know. They will sleep soundly; they will have rosy dreams——”

“And a darker awakening.”

Baruch sat down, and for a few moments rested his head on his folded arms. Then he rose suddenly.

“Nyman, is there a God?”

“I don't know. Opinions are divided on the question.”

Silently Baruch turned from him and measured the attic with furious strides. The candle was beginning to gutter in its socket, and Nyman, reaching down another from the shelf, lit it, and fastened it in the floating tallow. Baruch stopped and watched him.

“You are wasteful. That might have burned another five minutes,” he said.

“There are plenty more, and we may not require any to-morrow.”

The significance of the remark told on Baruch

like a blow. In an access of open panic he gripped Nyman by the arm.

"What will become of us, Nyman—what will become of us?"

Nyman lifted up his strong bony hands and looked at them in grim complacency.

"I have these," he said; "but as for you——" And he shook his head rather brutally.

"And that is not the worst of it," continued Baruch, darkly following his own thoughts, "not the sordid struggle for bread. God knows I have learned how to hunger, and to thrive on it. But to have seen the gates of the world open fair and wide, and then to be thrust back into the abyss, never, never, perhaps, to emerge again. You are right, Nyman. They know what they do. They know how to work that deadly policy of theirs. They pen up our bodies into pales, they exile our minds into darkness, because they are afraid of us, and there is nothing that makes men more merciless than fear. God, God, and then there are the old people with their hopes, their pride in me! What will my father say when I come and tell him: 'Father, you must teach me to cobble boots'?"

He paused, and in surprise watched Nyman's movements. The latter had seated himself at the table with an open book in front and pencil in hand.

"What are you doing, Nyman?"

"Problems in conic sections—for to-morrow's class."

"But to-morrow you will be expelled."

"To-day is not to-morrow, Baruch."

"And you are not human," cried Baruch, in a sort of fierce-hearted admiration.

Nyman's head bent lower. True, fear makes men merciless—even to themselves.

CHAPTER II

NOISELESSLY Nyman tip-toed about the room to avoid waking Baruch. There would be no need to rouse him for good two hours—they were not due at the Prefect's till eleven. And Baruch needed all the rest he could get. There was something of brotherly solicitude about the manner in which Nyman stopped every now and then to gaze at the worn, haggard face of his sleeping room-mate, a face which in repose made him think of some storm-tossed skiff which has found a precarious anchorage. Nyman knew that in spite of his repeated admonishings, Baruch had not sought his bed till far into the small hours of the morning. He knew also the thoughts that had lashed his friend up and down the room during that tempestuous vigil. Nyman knew, because they were the same thoughts he himself had battled down before he succeeded in numbing his brain into an all-too-brief oblivion.

Without a doubt Baruch's memory had harked back to the dim and distant days in their native townlet where, in close and inseparable comradeship, they had together grown into their teens. They had sat side by side in the Talmud school; they had gathered much difficult lore from the same

musty page ; they had winced beneath the blows of the same correcting rod. Nyman, an orphan, had been at the mercy of the world nearly all his life. Baruch's lot was not much brighter, except that he had a mother's pitying eyes and a father's desperate fist to hush his starveling cries into silence. They had nothing to temper the bleakness of their lives, except the golden dreams they wove in common as they sat in the gracious summer evenings on the bank of the broad river that swept majestically past the hovels of the township in disdainful unconcern at so much sordid misery. There they had sat, the three of them—he and Baruch, and little Black Malka, the girl with the dark tangled hair, who had no one but that wheezy grandmother of hers to look after her ; and who, therefore, in a wild, freelance way was at liberty to come and go as she pleased. And mostly it pleased her to sit by the riverside, listening to the strange talk of her two boy companions, their rebellious discontent with men and things, their importunate straining towards the mysterious future. She did not understand them at all ; to her there could be nothing better than to sit lazily by the riverside, watching the broad waters ripple at the stones they threw into them, and listening to the murmuring of the tall weeping-willows as they swayed and swished in the evening breeze. And one quiet Sabbath afternoon, when the whole world seemed to be standing still, as though it had grown tired of all human endeavour, out came Nyman with his daring plan, a plan which

— made Malka cry out in angry protest, and fix her swimming eyes on Baruch in terrified entreaty. For Nyman's plan was nothing more nor less than that he and Baruch should shake off the thrall of their surroundings, the bitter bondage of body and soul, and strike out, bold and fearless knights-errant, for the freedom of the far-away. Baruch had leapt at the thought, and, after having coaxed Malka into secrecy in the way he knew best, the two boys had stolen away with no other equipment save the certainty that through the dead of the night they were trudging on towards the morning. But Nyman was never sure—and, of course, he did not ask Baruch to decide—how much his plan had been due to the stir and spur of his soul's unrest, and how much to the vague pang because, though he might talk his heart out, he could never bring into Malka's eyes the look with which they turned on Baruch's at the barest word from the latter.

All that was long, long ago, and it was many a year since Malka's name had been spoken between them. For Malka had not learnt to write, and neither Nyman nor Baruch had since the day of their flight ever set foot again in their native place. Their quest had taken them hundreds of miles away from it, and they had never known the luxury of a spare copeck, much less of the many roubles the train journey would have cost. A post-card every six months or so was all that Baruch could allow himself to reassure his parents concerning his fate. But there were other things upon which Baruch had

probably fixed his retrospective gaze during those restless hours of the past night. There was the lucky chance of the well-to-do old bachelor who had found them huddling half dead with cold and hunger in his doorway, had taken them to live with him, and obtained for them admission at the local gymnasium. Then the sudden death of their benefactor, which left them stranded again two years later, and inaugurated for them a period of dire stress and all-encompassing gloom. Many a time it seemed that there was nothing left for them but to go under, and yet with indomitable courage they held on, winning their way steadily from class to class of the gymnasium, aided every now and then by some stray kindness which made their vicissitudes appear merely the normal undulations of human chance. It was true, people had sometimes been kind to them, more especially the women. And if ever the suspicion came to Nyman that they were kind chiefly for Baruch's sake, it only made him cling more closely to his friend, for the loyalty and the unconscious tact with which Baruch made their good fortune apply in equal shares to both of them. There was no Malka in the case.

Of course they had their supreme moments, for instance, when they were told that they had brilliantly passed their matriculation and would be allowed to proceed to the university. Naturally, long before then the individual bent of the two young men had asserted itself. Baruch entered himself for medicine, Nyman for the engineering course. But both were

confident that, though their careers might lead them in widely divergent paths, they would eventually meet again, somewhere on the mountain-tops of success. For in these sceptic and undeserving days miracles happen so rarely that not even the smallest could be spared to run to waste. When they remembered what they had already achieved ; when they considered where they had started from, and how far they had got, making vaulting-boards of obstacles and scaling-ladders of stumbling-blocks, could there be any doubt?

Nyman pulled himself up short with a choking cry. Oh, God ! no, there was no longer any doubt. There was every certainty about it. The miracle had been nothing but a mirage. The golden-turreted minarets of their hopes had dissolved into ironic mists. Everything was lost—nay, more than everything. The spring-time of their life had been wasted. They had never been young. They had looked to the rich fulfilment of their manhood to compensate them for that. And now they were men to whom it would never be given to redeem their youth. Beggared of all, they had acquired in exchange only the cursed gift of knowledge. And what would they do with that cursed gift—what would it do with them, down there in the underworld to which they would presently return ?

Nyman cast a questioning glance at Baruch as though he expected an answer from him. Baruch was still asleep, but the drawn look on his face and the twitching at the corners of his mouth spoke of

some agonized working of his mind. Nyman set his own lips, almost angrily. Why should he feel more pity for Baruch than for himself? What if he were a little better armed for the impending fray; what if bodily he was more fit to cope with the grim realities which to-morrow would face them—was his heart not of as fine a fibre as Baruch's, was it not as delicate an instrument to be played upon and quiver as discordantly at the rough touch of fate? He, too, felt attuned to a great destiny; he, too, could sit worthily in a high place where he might reflect the splendour of the stars. No, he would not pity Baruch, he would not pity himself; he would henceforth pity nothing and no one. He would harden his heart and challenge the world to do its worst.

He turned away, for with a frantic shooting out of his arms Baruch had sat up.

"I dreamt I was drowning," he murmured.

"You might have dreamt of something worse," said Nyman. "Get up. Breakfast will soon be ready. We haven't too much time."

"Oh yes," said Baruch. A sudden tremor of recollection shook him fully awake. "What sort of a day is it, Nyman?"

"Muggy, miserable; specially adapted for the occasion."

"Then—then you don't feel like taking a brighter view?"

"I will tell you—after we have seen the Prefect."

Baruch finished his toilette in silence. Silently,

too, they got through their frugal meal of coffee and black bread, and then it was time for them to start forth on their momentous errand. For a minute or two they busied themselves aimlessly about the room, as though they found it difficult to take the initial step towards the great issue that lay before them. Dimly, also, they felt that there was something hallowed about these moments in which they must prepare themselves for some sudden and undreamt-of jeopardy to their life-long comradeship. The thought made Baruch hold out a shaky hand and put a quaver into his voice.

"Nyman, whatever comes, one thing is sure. . . ."

"One thing is sure—that we shall be asked to go," replied Nyman, as, with a grim laugh, his own hand closed over Baruch's.

"Oh, Nyman, don't jest. I am not in a mood for jesting, and neither, I would swear, are you. What I mean is——"

"Don't trouble. I know quite well what you mean. You are going to refer to David and Jonathan, Damon and Pythias, and all the other more or less historic instances. And that's exactly what I don't want you to do. For Heaven's sake, don't get sentimental. We shall have plenty of time for that sort of foolery later on."

"Oh, well, as long as you understand!" said Baruch, with a sigh.

It was a leisurely half-hour's walk to the government building where the Prefect was to receive them in his bureau. When they got there they found

most of their fellow-petitioners already assembled. They made a sprightly and animated crowd. Nyman's misgivings had evidently not come home to them, and the prevailing note was one of high optimism. It was only when they were admitted to the ante-chamber, leading to the Prefect's private room, that a sense of the occasion's full portentousness settled down on them and hushed their exuberance. The tension deepened as almost immediately after they became aware of a certain ominousness in the mode of procedure. Shortly after eleven the first of the students was called into the Prefect's sanctum, followed at intervals of scarcely more than a minute by the others in alphabetical order. So far this was in accordance with the undertaking that each should be given an opportunity of stating his case separately. But none of those that had gone in came out again into the ante-chamber. They were evidently passed out into the street by some other exit leading from the inner room, leaving those whose turn was still to come in utter ignorance of what had taken place within. There was in this an air of stealthiness and precaution which did not look promising. No hint was to be allowed upon which an answer or an attitude might be modelled or modified. The dwindling group looked at one another to see how far each one's anxiety was mirrored in the other's face.

Baruch took an instinctive step forward when he heard Nyman's name called. The impulse proved to him how much the other had become his second

self. But a sudden diversion of interest prevented him from harping on the thought. The outer door of the waiting-room opened suddenly, and a lady rustled in, stately and erect of bearing, despite the silver-white of her hair, which showed her to be nearing the winter of life. She cast a hasty, haughty look about her, and, gathering up her skirts a little more closely, swept swiftly into the Prefect's room beyond. Some of the men knew her.

"The baroness—the Prefect's wife," the whisper went round.

What construction was there to be put on her coming? Her presence seemed to rob the occasion of some of its official severity—gave it something of a social tinge. And yet—why were none of their comrades allowed to come back?

It was for Baruch to discover the reason for her arrival. His turn was three or four from the end, and as, in response to his call, he entered the bureau, he heard the concluding words of the remark the baroness was addressing to her husband.

". . . and she simply gets furious if she is kept waiting by any of her guests. And knowing your bad habit of forgetting your social obligations over your work, I took the precaution to come and fetch you. Didn't I do right?"

"Quite right, my dear. When do you ever do anything wrong?" smiled the Prefect. "I shall be ready in five minutes."

He fumbled hastily among the pile of papers before him.

"Volkman—Volkman,—ah, yes; this is your dossier, Mr. Volkman. Well, I have given your case the fullest consideration, and I regret to say that I see no reason for going counter to the decision of the University Senate. You must leave Odessa within twenty-four hours. Only three more Z's, my dear," he added, turning to the baroness.

He was about to touch the bell as a signal to the attending clerk, when he felt his arm detained by a quick movement of the baroness.

"What is it, my dear?"

"But look, Sergei, have you looked at him?" she whispered.

The Prefect shot Baruch a piercing glance from under his bushy eyebrows.

"He certainly has turned very white, poor fellow," he replied in an undertone. "But what can I do? You know, my dear. . . ." And he shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"But doesn't he strike you?" the baroness whispered back again. "Have you ever seen a more perfect replica of Apollo Belvedere in the flesh?"

"Yes, he's handsome enough, I admit. Still, what has that to do with it?"

"A man with a face and figure like that would be an ornament to any society," said the baroness, her tone coldly critical but animated by conviction. "I think he deserves to be encouraged."

"But how, my dear? What do you expect me to do?"

"To make an exception with him."

"What, allow him to stay?"

"Yes, Sergei."

The Prefect bit his quill reflectively; then he bowed courteously to his wife.

"Since you ask it, Adèle; I don't think they can object to one exception. Besides, it will put a better face on the matter."

"Thank you, Sergei," replied the baroness, pressing his arm.

"Mr. Volkmann," said the Prefect, raising his voice, "you have been fortunate enough to find a powerful advocate of your claims, and in view of certain new facts that have come to my notice, I shall be happy to reverse the decision of the Senate in your case."

The pallor in Baruch's face had given way to a deep flush. He beat down the dizzy feeling which was making the room spin round and drew himself up stiffly.

"Your Excellency's pardon," he said, "but I could not help overhearing—the new facts you speak of refer, it would seem, to something connected with my personal appearance."

"You must excuse us, I am afraid we have been rather rude," laughed the Prefect, glancing at his wife.

"And any merit I may possess—my conduct, my industry, my—my—these do not enter into the question."

"What does it matter, boy?" exclaimed the

Prefect. "You made a request—it has been granted. There's no need to go into the why and wherefore."

"Yes, Mr. Volkmann, take the gifts the gods send you and be grateful," broke in the baroness.

Baruch started. Was it possible that this proud woman could put such kindly earnestness into her words, or that her hard, imperious face could soften into such lines of motherly solicitude? It ousted from his heart the strange mixture of truculence and humiliation at her intercession and lifted up his whole being in an ecstasy of gratitude. What was he about? How dared he quarrel with his good fortune? And yet, if it had concerned merely himself, he might still have stood out; or at any rate he would not have accepted it till, by some trick of reasoning, he had juggled it from the accident it was, into the just and lawful concession it should be. But he had no time to indulge in such mental antics. There was Nyman to be considered. The Prefect had said that he was the only exception, and therefore Nyman was among the doomed. He could not let that remain so. Nyman—his second self—must not be left behind, and besides, the tide of luck was flowing. . . .

"Your Excellency, I am deeply and humbly grateful," said Baruch, his gaze taking in the baroness as well, "and I am perfectly willing to avail myself of your kindness."

The Prefect lifted his head in astonishment, and his lips moved as though to echo the last words.

"But I would put it to your Excellency," continued Baruch, either consciously or unconsciously ignoring the warning, "my fortunes are bound up with those of a dear friend of mine, one of those whose application for reinstatement has, I understand, been refused, and unless you extend to him the same indulgence as to me, I could not dream of——"

He stopped short as he saw the Prefect sit bolt upright in his chair, his astonishment having changed to unmistakable displeasure.

"You are a very difficult young man," the Prefect reprimanded him sharply. "Permit me to remark that I am not accustomed to deal with people—and especially those who ask me for favours—under conditions laid down by themselves. To you it is open to stay at the university or to go. I have nothing to do with your friend. You have twenty-four hours in which to think it over. This door, please."

"But remember that charity begins at home."

Baruch turned at the words from the stately, white-haired woman and saw the anxious smile which accompanied them. With a curt bow—it was really not much more than a nod—he passed out through the exit indicated. Why should he give her the impression that he considered himself beholden to her? Her well-meaning interposition had turned out to be nothing but a blundering officiousness, which had resulted for him in an additional spasm of disappointment.

As he anticipated, he found Nyman already back in their attic. Two small, tattered portmanteaux lay open on the floor, and Nyman was bending over a garment in which he was clumsily stitching up a rent.

"Is it over, the farce?" he asked off-hand, without looking up from his task.

"Yes, the farce, the *deâ ex machinâ* and all," muttered Baruch, sitting down in a way that showed his utter mental and physical exhaustion.

"Rather more comical even than we expected, wasn't it?" continued Nyman, with the same pretence of light-heartedness. "They even brought in the old bogey of political implications so as to get rid of us within the customary twenty-four hours. And do you know what else that means?"

Baruch made no reply.

"It means, however much you may get sulky over it, my friend, that we must go back to Ditomar, glorious Ditomar. Yes, yes, we had better hie ourselves back there in a straight line without putting ourselves to the trouble of making a circle, because being suspects, the police will give us no rest till they have chased us back to our native dung-hill. I thought I would get your trunk out at the same time as mine. We can catch to-day's train comfortably. I have only got to sew on two buttons after this. The money we have saved towards next semester's fees together with what we may get for our student's uniforms will take us good part of the way. The rest we can walk." He

gave a sigh of mock relief as he bit off the thread. "Thank God that at last we shall feel our legs under us again."

Baruch had got up and placed himself at the window with his back to Nyman. There was something in his protracted silence, his air of reticence and self-restraint, which made the other turn round to watch him attentively, and then spring towards him on the spur of a sudden intuition.

"Baruch, you are hiding something from me," he cried.

Baruch remained motionless.

"You are hiding something," repeated Nyman more fiercely. "Tell me, man, or I'll shake it out of you." And, suiting the action to the word, he gripped Baruch by the lapels of his coat. "Ah, now that I come to think of it, you mumbled something about a *dea ex*. . . . Who was she, and what did she do?"

"She was the Prefect's wife," replied Baruch, turning on him a glassy stare. "You saw her go in—and what she did was to ask the Prefect to let me stay. I answered——"

"You answered?"

"That there were two of us."

"You pleaded for me—naturally. And then?"

"And then he showed me the door."

"Naturally again," said Nyman. His arms dropped limply to his side, and he fell back a pace or two. His teeth met in his underlip under the strain of his reflections. Then he shook his head.

"No, no, my dear Baruch, that won't do. You are asking a little too much of me."

Baruch fixed on him a vacant look of inquiry.

"You want me to stand by and watch you commit social and intellectual suicide. You want me to take on my conscience the murder of your career. I am not strong enough to carry two destinies. There's no other way now. You must stay—not for your sake, but for mine."

Baruch threw up his arms.

"Nyman, you damnable sophist, you specious trickster, you heart of gold . . .!"

"That's very good," said Nyman, nonchalant. "I like the climax. And now we'll sit down and have our last meal together. Here's bread and cheese. After this you'll get hot dinners every day. You'll be earning money like dirt. With sixty of us gone, private teachers will be at a premium."

Ten minutes later he got up, strapped his portmanteau, and put on his cap.

"Well, good-bye, Baruch."

"Yes, here, and then again at the station," replied the latter, with a catch in his voice.

"Oh no, you're not coming to the station," said Nyman, decisively. "How on earth would it look? You spruce in your uniform, and I a tattered navvy, shouldering his miserable bit of baggage. I must keep up your dignity. I've none of my own to keep up now."

Baruch's hands were clasped in piteous entreaty.

"Oh, Nyman, Nyman, what have I done?"

Friend, brother—do not cast me off. Is it my fault that—that——”

“That you are lucky? No; but it's your fault that you're a fool, and want to make scenes. Or, if you insist on it, be, at least, decent, and choose a spot where you can do it without drawing applause from an audience. So, mind you, no station for you—do you understand? Let's get it over here. Now then—one good hug.”

Baruch did not go to the station. He quite understood. Nyman was wise and practical, he did not believe in unnecessary martyrdom. He did not wish to take with him the memory of his friend Baruch standing there on the platform as the train steamed out, the living monument to all his dead hopes. He did not want to be tortured by the contrast that would cleave his heart in twain. For the one, Odessa, and the alluring glow of the future; for the other, Ditomar, and the bleakness of the underworld.

But there must be failures in order that there might be victories, else there would be no earth and no heaven.

So, at least, thought Nyman, the pseudo-Stoic, as, seeking a suitable dirge for his dead self, he opened his Horace once more upon yesterday's *folleu, fugaces!*”

CHAPTER III

It was many days before Baruch Volkmann could settle down again to his studies with an undivided mind. There was upon him all the time an obstinate and tenacious fear, such as must haunt those who have escaped from some great conflagration, or any other elemental catastrophe, in which the rest of their companions have perished. He woke up at nights with a start to ask himself whether the scene at the Prefect's had been a dream, and whether his providential rescue was the mockery of his imagination which had run to riot under the stress of an unbearable reality. He felt mean and contemptible as he reflected how hollow must have been the heroic impulse under which he had made his fate contingent on Nyman's; how artificial and inflated the mood in which he had deemed himself capable of a sacrifice worthy to stand on a par with—as Nyman had put it—the great historic instances of friendship. What if Nyman, in his bitterness and chagrin, had taken him at his word? And in those moments Baruch's fears grew to a panic as he wondered for what untoward experiences fate was reserving him, since it had taken the trouble to

carry him safely through such jeopardies of his own making.

This reaction of self-realization had begun to take effect upon him very speedily—almost within the same hour in which he and Nyman had said good-bye to each other. In a fever of trepidation he dragged himself through a sleepless night, fearful lest, when he took his decision to the Prefect next morning, some sinister development might have arisen to wreck the chance he had been given. But his apprehensions had been vain. The Prefect received him courteously, even with a certain amount of benevolence; but, while commending Baruch on his decision, expressed his opinion quite frankly.

“I assure you I haven’t the slightest claim to your thanks, my dear Volkmann,” he said. “If it had depended on me, you would not have received an atom more consideration than did your colleagues. Still, it’s only fair I should admit it to you—I rather liked that little outbreak of indignation in which you indulged yourself. To a man of spirit it must be very galling to be made the sport of a woman’s whim, even if it is of such advantage as it was in your case. Now, if I were you, I should pour the full vials of my wrath on the baroness’s head. It will teach her to be more discreet in the future.”

Baruch took the hint. He wrote the baroness a letter of thanks, not erring on the side of fulsome-ness, but just expressing, in a few heart-felt words, the life-long obligation under which she had placed

him. He even thought of rivalling her husband's frankness by acknowledging and asking her pardon for the uncalled-for ebullition into which he had allowed himself to be betrayed by her very kindness to him. But he refrained, because that might appear to be striking a too personal note, at which she might possibly, and justly, take umbrage.

He sent off the letter with a dim idea that it would evoke some reply, distant and formal enough, it was only to be expected, but consistent with the unmistakable interest in his welfare she had displayed. However, day after day went by without a sign from her, bringing to Baruch a vague feeling of rebuff, for her silence was evidently intended to convey to him that he had been guilty of an impertinence, an intrusion. And he was just beginning to force the matter out of his mind when, quite a month later, he received a note from the baroness, by no means distant or formal, but, on the contrary, couched in distinctly cordial terms. She explained and excused her delay by the fact that she had been away from home, and that, by an oversight, his letter had not been forwarded on to her. Would he show his forgiveness and his reciprocal desire for a better acquaintance by coming to take tea with them—quite *en famille*—on the Monday following?

Baruch read the note half a dozen times to make sure it was not a sarcasm, a jest. He came to the conclusion that it was not meant for a joke, nor did the idea of joking accord with the impression the stately, white-haired woman had left on his mind.

Then he thought it must be a mistake. There seemed an almost ludicrous incongruity between the coroneted envelope and the plebeian address to which it had been despatched. And then, finding that there was no mistake, he inconsequently wished that there had been one, and would have preferred to have been ignored by her rather than to be overwhelmed by this startling contingency. He, the beggar-student, the penniless pariah, to be admitted on visiting terms to one of the greatest houses in Odessa. The thought dizzied him, as though he were climbing some actual geographical height. And finally, to save himself from further conflict of his emotions, he sat down and wrote his acceptance of the invitation.

He knew he was woefully ignorant of the niceties of social etiquette, but he felt that the first requisite of good manners was an absence of *gaucherie* and excitement. So the self-control and assurance into which he had drilled himself during the intervening days did not forsake him on finding, as he was being shown into the drawing-room, that two other visitors—both ladies—were present. The Prefect remained seated, not interrupting his conversation with them; but the baroness came to meet him with a charming smile.

“Ah, I am glad to see you, Mr. Volkmann,” she exclaimed. Then she sank her voice. “You see, we are not quite alone, as I promised we should be; but some friends who happened to be passing through the town came in unexpectedly. You don’t mind, do you?”

"It is, perhaps, for me to apologize for——" began Baruch.

"The idea!" she interrupted him. And then, turning to her husband, said admonishingly, "Sergei, here is Mr. Volkmann. You remember him, don't you?"

With an air of easy unconcern, Baruch stepped over to him to prevent him from rising. The Prefect shook hands, warmly enough, turning on him a glance of good humour that was, perhaps, not quite free from amusement. Baruch did not notice it, for there was something else which had asserted a previous claim to his observation. It was the younger of the two lady visitors, of whom in passing he had caught a glimpse. The sight of her had awakened in him suddenly a strange sense of familiarity, an impalpable recollection, the origin of which he struggled for the moment vainly to locate. Where on earth had he seen this girl before? It made him uneasy. Was he giving his imagination too free a hand—was he allowing it to colour with significance the most commonplace facts? This girl—a mere notion—— The baroness interrupted him.

"Mr. Volkmann, let me introduce you. Madame de Koratoff—Mademoiselle de Koratoff."

Then Baruch knew, and felt reassured. No, his thinking faculties were normal enough. His fancy was not playing him any tricks. Of course, it was not by any means strange that he should know this girl. It would have been much stranger if he did not.

That was as far as he could get for the time being. The baroness, after handing him his tea, plunged him at once into the stream of the general conversation, and, as he could not help seeing, he delighted her by showing himself such an experienced swimmer. The girl did not say much, but she giggled a great deal, whether from nervousness or from high spirits was difficult to determine. She was quite young, and had only a few months ago left the seclusion of the convent school.

At least, so she informed Baruch when the talk of the three older people took a turn to more intimate topics, leaving the other two detached and almost *tête-à-tête*. The girl seemed inclined to talk quite freely now.

"Yes, mamma came to fetch me from the convent, and then she took me round on a visiting tour to all my numerous relatives. I suppose her idea was to gather in congratulations on the possession of such a wonderful daughter. Don't you think so?"

Baruch, falling readily into her flippant strain, smiled as he wrinkled his eyebrows.

"That's a difficult question to answer, mademoiselle. If I say Yes, it would be uncharitable to your mother. If I say No, it might be uncomplimentary to you."

"Oh, then don't do anything so horrible as either. But, if you really want to know," she continued gravely, "they did seem to think very highly of me. *Ma foi*, the fuss they made—just as

if I had been a princess. It's nice to be made a fuss of, isn't it?"

"Yes, in moderation."

"Excuse me, but my relatives do everything in moderation. Overdoing anything is very ungenteel, as Sœur Angele used to tell us at the convent. And we have been all of us very well brought up. O *mon Dieu*, what was I talking about?"

"About the fuss."

"Yes; what do you think? They actually gave parties in honour of me, with dancing and all. I suppose you do a great deal of dancing here in Odessa?"

"I have done a lot—in a sort of way," replied Baruch, grimly.

"Then it must have been a queer sort of way, judging from the tone in which you say it," she continued, looking at him dubiously; and the look seemed to tell Baruch that there might be a certain amount of depth and shrewdness beneath her ingenuous prattle. "Oh, I wish you wouldn't always put me out, Mr. Volkmann. Now, where was I? Have I told you yet about my cousins? No, I'm quite sure I haven't. Oh dear, that was the greatest fun of all. They are really very nice boys, especially at Aunt Olga's, where we have just come from; but I hadn't been more than a day in the place when they turned into perfect cut-throats and desperadoes—all on account of me. Such quarrellings and black looks at one another; and, fancy, the night before we went away poor Karol got three days' 'chamber-arrest' from his father, because—oh, well, because

he kissed me in the corridor, and Ivan saw it and told uncle about it. Poor boy—but he slipped out through the window during the night, leaving a note to say that he had gone away to become a bandit chief in the Caucasus, and they would never see him any more. I wonder if he has come home yet. I really shall write to inquire—if I remember, that is.”

“Yes, you must have had a good time,” commented Baruch.

He was trying to sum her up. No, on the whole, the coquetry was unconscious, the “backfisch” was there in all her unadulterated ingenuousness. Besides, she was pretty enough, in her dainty porcelain fashion, to produce a flutter among a pack of callow boys. She was very young, even for the nineteen years which she claimed with indignant pride when he professed to doubt the fact. It would probably be many years yet before she could be taken seriously. However, what did it matter to him?

Her lips had closed with a mutinous expression, and she stared regretfully at the carpet.

“But to-morrow it’s all over. To-morrow we go back to Ditomar,” she said, half to herself.

“Ah, yes, to Ditomar,” echoed Baruch.

She shot him a swift look.

“Why do you say that? Do you know Ditomar?” she asked, her curiosity visibly aroused.

“Yes; I was there once as a child.”

“Oh, indeed? How very interesting. My father, you know, General Koratoff, is Governor of

the Ditomarsk district. He's been there for ever so long, and they haven't given him any promotion yet."

Baruch tried to look sympathetic.

"Oh, I don't like it at all," she broke forth impetuously, "the idea of going back to the gloomy, draughty old Government House, standing all by itself just outside the forest. And then there's the river. It's all right in the winter, when you can skate on it; but when it thaws, and the floods come on—— Do you know, just before I went to the convent, we nearly all one night got drowned in our beds. But fancy your knowing Ditomar. Most people I ask have never even heard of it. They say it must have crept into the map when no one was looking."

"They were probably only chaffing you," suggested Baruch, with a smile.

"Oho, were they? Then please understand, once and for all, that I allow no one to chaff me, Mr. Volkmann," she exclaimed, as a dangerous light leapt into her eyes.

That danger light was the only interest she had yet furnished to Baruch, because it illumined his mind to other recollections which otherwise might have remained obscured. He now at last recognized in her very completely the flaxen-haired little whirlwind who had pursued her fearless course along the Ditomar roads on her fiery Hungarian pony, laughing defiance at the hoarse-throated remonstrances of the Cossack groom trying to keep as closely at her

heels as he could. Baruch wondered what she would say if he were to remind her of the occasion when, having nearly ridden him down, she struck at him with her riding-whip, screaming in her childish treble at the clumsy, dirty Jew-boy to get out of her way. And yet, despite the good care he had taken ever afterwards to keep out of the way of the vixenish little amazon, she had again crossed his path—only this time she treated him with considerably more politeness. He felt strongly inclined to laugh outright. A moment later she afforded him additional cause for amusement.

“And then, perhaps, I wouldn’t mind Ditomar so much, if it weren’t for the Jews there. Why, the place is infested with them, simply swarming with them. Wherever you turn, it’s unwashed brats and draggle-tailed women and men with greasy long beards—oh, such ugly men. When I was home last, that’s two years ago, they were uglier than ever. Oh, it’s horrid! Aren’t you sorry for me, Mr. Volkmann?”

“What, that your æsthetic sense is so highly developed?” asked Baruch, gravely.

She looked at him puzzled. Then she shook her head.

“I don’t know what you mean. But you can take my word for it—they *are* horrid, those Jews. We all detest them—papa especially. They give him no end of trouble, papa says. If I were the Emperor, do you know what I should do with them?”

Baruch pretended to reflect:

"Take them to the Kremlin, and feed them on marzipan," he said finally.

"Oh, Mr. Volkmann!" she exclaimed, with every appearance of being terribly shocked. "How can you suggest such a thing? Why, it's treason—it's sacrilege of the worst description. You can hardly be a Christian to say that. The Jews in the Kremlin!"

"Well, what would you do with them?" Baruch asked, biting his lip to keep back his laughter at her agitation.

"I am not going to tell you, since you are so flippant. The Jews in the Kremlin!"

This time Baruch could not help laughing outright. What else was he to do? Be dramatic and break this butterfly on the wheel of his indignation? The dignity of his people must be a poor thing if it had to be defended against, or avenged for, the sting of every puny gnat. But he had it on the tip of his tongue to ask her if she had read Heine's "Donna Clara," and remembered the delectable part played in its *dénouement* by that unknown Knight of Saragossa.

She had evidently regained her composure, for she was turning to him again with a smile, when there was a movement among the other group of three.

"Alma, we must go," exclaimed Madame de Koratoff.

"If mamma says so, I suppose we must," said the girl, in what Baruch could not but think a tone of

regret. "And you haven't told me a word about yourself."

"I never talk about myself," said Baruch, curtly.

"What, have you so much to hide?" she asked gaily.

Again that flash of shrewdness. With proper handling, thought Baruch, the girl might be made to grow out of being a fool.

"I suppose you are not likely to be in Ditomar again at any time in the near or far future, are you?" she continued. Her voice seemed to have resumed its note of regret.

"No one is safe against accidents," was his blunt reply.

She seemed to be turning something over in her mind, and after some hesitation began impulsively—

"Well, Mr. Volkmann, if ever you do come to——"

She could not finish her remark, because Madame de Koratoff broke in on her—a little sharply, perhaps—

"Well, Alma, are you ready?"

"Yes, mamma, quite. Good-bye, Mr. Volkmann," and she held out her hand.

"Good-bye," he replied, taking it slowly. "And don't forget——"

"Forget what?" she asked eagerly.

"To inquire about Karol."

"Karol? Oh yes, poor cousin Karol. Thank you very much for reminding me."

She threw him another laughing nod from the

doorway, but whether it was from some peculiar effect of light and shadow, a wistful look seemed to have come into her great eyes.

Baruch and the baroness remained behind alone, for the Prefect had gone to see the visitors out and from there, as he informed Baruch, was proceeding straight on to his study.

"And now we can have ten minutes all to ourselves," said the baroness, making Baruch sit down on the settee next to her.

She began by asking him a few questions referring mainly to his college career, a subject she evidently thought herself entitled to speak about, as it had formed the basis of their acquaintance. She seemed purposely to avoid all inquiry as to his previous history, but she did it unostentatiously, so as not to imply that it contained anything which did not bear being touched upon. And, above all, there was in her words a total absence of what might be taken for prying inquisitiveness or patronising curiosity. It was an interchange of information as between equals. Baruch felt his heart swell. There came upon him a sense of buoyant exhilaration which scarcely allowed him to keep his seat. It all seemed so simple, so spontaneous, and yet this accident, which had set him in the very penetralia of the mighty—what a world of effort, of achievement did it not signify. What a measureless gulf separated him from what he was but a few weeks ago. He forgot that all this might only be a fantastic interlude, that the grim struggle with the reality was

waiting to receive him again as soon as he set foot outside these charmed doors, that he was still nothing but the beggar-student whom a momentary luxury should not blind to the inexorable necessities of his precarious lot. The inspiriting well-being of the hour fired him to unprecedented feats, and when eventually the main burden of the talk devolved on him, he surpassed himself. The baroness listened to him smilingly, apparently inclined to go on and on listening to him, because, although Baruch, out of mere good manners, had risen once or twice to take his departure, the ten minutes had grown into a full hour before the baroness would consent to his leaving. Without having laid himself out to it, he knew he had made on her a favourable impression, but how favourable he did not know till he was actually making his adieux to her.

"Well, Mr. Volkmann, shall I tell you why I asked you to call here?" she said.

"I have been wondering why," he replied quickly.

"Because it struck me—well, I have never had a son, but if I had, I should have liked him to resemble you."

Baruch flushed at the outspokenness of the compliment.

"But you don't know me, baroness," he stammered.

"An omission I hope to make good," she replied.

Even so Baruch did not know whether her hope

was a mere commonplace of courtesy, or whether she intended to act upon it. His mind was set at rest on the matter very soon and very conclusively. Three days after his visit he received an autograph letter from the Prefect, asking him to come and see him on a business of some importance.

"My dear Volkmann," the Prefect received him laughingly, "you seem to have bewitched my wife. Fortunately, or unfortunately, she is nearly old enough to be your grandmother, so that knocks on the head any chance of scandal. The matter I wish to talk to you about is this. My junior private secretary has just left me, and my wife has prevailed upon me, a little against my will—you know my weakness for candour, Volkmann—to offer the post to you. On trial, of course."

Baruch rose and impulsively took a step forward.

"Are you really serious, sir?" he quavered.

"I never trifle in matters of business," replied the Prefect, gravely. "But just one moment, Volkmann."

Baruch looked at him, his heart in his mouth.

"There's a condition," continued the Prefect, not without a tinge of embarrassment in his manner.

A light broke on Baruch, and he turned pale.

"I see you have guessed what I refer to," said the Prefect, kindly. "Well, but seeing that yours will be a semi-official position, it is a *sine qua non* that you should rid yourself of any disadvantage with which you may have been burdened by the accident of your birth."

"My religion, for instance?" said Baruch.

"Precisely. At the same time, your disburdening yourself is intended for nothing more than a measure of convenience. Talking as between men of the world, I know quite well that the whole thing can be nothing but a fraud. I don't know the strength of your religious convictions, but be they ever so weak, I don't expect you to be a modern Saul of Tarsus, going forth and being vouchsafed a miraculous conversion in the streets of Odessa. Still, there is no going away from it—you have to be labelled anew."

"Will the label cover everything, your Excellency?" asked Baruch, his words a mere hoarse whisper.

"What do you mean?"

"The inward reproach as well as the outward convenience."

"That is a matter entirely for yourself," replied the Prefect. "You are the master of your conscience."

"And now I am to become its slave," said Baruch, his face hard set. "No, your Excellency, I thank you and your wife for this renewed manifestation of your goodwill to me—but I cannot accept it on those terms."

"I want to point out to you once more that they are no arbitrary disposition on my part, but simply an unavoidable necessity."

"I am aware of that, your Excellency. It makes my refusal all the more difficult to me."

The Prefect shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, my dear Volkmann, just as you please. We can remain friends just the same, and I have kept my word to my wife. She will be rather disappointed. But why not," he added, as though struck by a new idea, "take twenty-four hours to make up your mind, as you did last time? It's a great opportunity to throw away on the spur of the moment."

"Oh God, yes, a great opportunity," moaned Baruch. Then he broke out fiercely: "I implore your Excellency to accept my decision now."

"It's too late for that, Volkmann," replied the Prefect, firmly. "I cannot retract my suggestion that you should take a day to think the matter over. I never retract anything. It's too dangerous for a man with my burden of authority to appear inconsistent even to himself. If you tell me No to-morrow, I shall be sure that you have done justice to us both."

Baruch staggered out and went home to think. It was as the Prefect had said—he had to do justice to himself. And he found out, as many have found out before him, that in order to do that, one had to descend to purgatory. Hour after hour went by, and he was still on the rack. He wondered—no, he knew, what the first Marrano had felt. He shrank from the word. It seemed to him the first step on the road to compromise, to commitment. And to make sure that he was not going on a false track, he turned back and started afresh. Time and again he

harked back to the beginning, but only to land himself each time into the same *impasse*. Spent and weary he lifted his despairing hands to the cloud-covered heavens.

As though in response to his appeal, the skies cleared in small, and then larger, and yet larger patches. Here and there a star came out, their number growing rapidly till, soon after midnight, the whole host of them thronged the firmament. Hungrily, expectantly, he fixed his eyes upon them. Surely it was as profitable to commune with them as with his own inarticulate heart. Gradually he began to read a message in them. In a burst of self-revelation he caught their drift. They were there to tell him that man, the infinitesimal pigmy, was but the toy of the giant infinities. What did he matter? How much did man, though he typified a whole code of principles or the destiny of a nation, how much did he signify in the great scheme of things? Ay, had God meant man to be divine, He would not have created the stars.

CHAPTER IV

Two out of the three writing-desks in the large room set aside for the Prefect's three private secretaries were unoccupied. At the third, the sole occupant of the room, sat Baruch, turning over voluminous papers and busily making notes. He rose and remained standing as the door opened and the Prefect entered.

"I have something to tell you that will please you, Volkmann," said the Prefect, pleasantly.

Baruch bowed, waiting for the other to continue.

"I have an inquiry from the Minister of the Interior for the name of the official who drew up the report on the condition of the South-Russian iron industry. He is very pleased with it. He writes it is capitally done. Possibly it may mean a decoration for you."

Baruch bowed again.

"I am delighted to know that I have done my duty acceptably, your Excellency," he said quietly. "The knowledge is sufficient recompense for me."

The Prefect assumed an air of mock displeasure.

"That is the worst of you, Volkmann—your fondness for commonplaces," he said genially. "As if you could make me believe that you would not

much sooner have the decoration. However, you are quite right. No man can hope to be a good servant if he does not know how to play the hypocrite to his master."

"Who is indulging in commonplaces now, your Excellency?" asked Baruch, smiling.

The Prefect laughed.

"Ah, well, I'll never get the better of you."

He paused abruptly, drew out his watch, and looked about him. His face clouded.

"Half-past eleven—and you here all alone. Where are Onogran and de Gorski? Haven't they been in yet?"

"No, your Excellency," said Baruch. "But I was just about to hand your Excellency two letters addressed to you in their handwriting."

The Prefect opened and glanced through them, a contemptuous smile deepening on his face.

"Apologies for non-attendance, of course," he informed Baruch, tearing the two missives into shreds, and flinging them on the floor. "By a curious coincidence, they both have a relative dying. At any rate, there seems to have been no collusion between them. Volkmann, you will have to keep a register of their dead family connections. The scamps! I haven't the faintest doubt that one could find them on the Tritschka race-course or at the Casino roulette table." He uttered an exclamation that combined in it anger and relief. "Ah, well, Volkmann, fortunately I have you. I really don't know what I should have done otherwise."

"Your Excellency is too kind," said Baruch.

"Very well, have it your way, since you won't allow me to have an opinion of my own," smiled the Prefect. "There, I know you want to get on with your work, so I won't waste any more of your time." And, with a kindly nod, he left the room.

It was by no means the first occasion in the two years during which Volkmann had been in the service of the Prefect that the latter had so frankly acknowledged the obligation he felt towards him. And Volkmann was human enough to acknowledge to himself, with equal frankness, that he deserved the Prefect's praises. But what he tried assiduously to conceal from himself, was the cause and motive force which, apart from his desire to make headway, had helped him to merit those praises. He would not admit to himself what really had made him plunge with such feverish zeal into his new environment and occupation. He had determined that there was nothing to admit. He had to deal with one point, and one point only. He had taken his step, and it would not do to cripple his energies by nursing a valetudinarian conscience. "Boris Volkmann, Secretary to the Imperial Prefecture." The thrill of self-distrustful exultation with which he had scanned the new legend of his visiting-cards had decided him that he must never let his ambition run in double harness with his fear. They were an ill-matched team which might hurry even the deftest of charioteers to destruction.

But, despite his decision to avoid all reference to

the ostensible change of his religious belief, accident came and struck one clear strong note that set all the dormant chords of his inner life vibrating once more. However, only for a little while; then he turned back—and for all time, as he thought—to his policy of adamant self-oblivion. It was when he heard of the death of both his parents. The news came to him in a letter from Nyman. That was the letter with which Nyman at length broke the obstinate silence he had hitherto maintained towards all the communications and inquiries Baruch had addressed to him. Baruch knew that his letters had reached their destination, because they did not come back to him. Nyman's silence he accounted for as Nyman's way of showing that he had definitely turned his back on the past, and all it had ever contained—Baruch Volkmann included. It could not be his protest against the new developments in Baruch's career, for Baruch had told him everything—except what there really was to tell.

“Your parents died within a few hours of each other,” ran Nyman's letter. “There was no time to get you here to the funeral. I saw to it that they were buried decently. Out of the handsome allowance you have been making them for the last year or two—did I not prophesy that you would make a fortune out of private lessons after the general exodus?—they had saved enough to pay all the necessary charges, and there will be sufficient over for a tombstone. I believe they intended hoarding it up till it amounted to the price of your

railway journey there and back. They had got very near it, too. I send you my condolences.

“As for myself, I am doing very well. At first I had a hard time of it, as the raft business, to which I applied myself, was rather slack, and there was nothing else doing. Integral calculus is at a discount in Ditomar. But lately I had a stroke of luck. The ferryman here died, and they gave me his post. The way I obtained the appointment—ahem, appointment!—may interest and amuse you. Listen. We, that is myself and half a dozen strapping mujiks, had to appear before the Gubernator, de Koratoff—you may remember him, he was here in your time. He does everything himself, because that’s the way he can do most mischief. I appear before his augustness, and he looks me up and down with a scowl. ‘What do you want, Jew?’ he asks. ‘The honour of becoming the Charon of Ditomar,’ I replied. ‘The Charon—how do you know of Charon?’ he asked, evidently surprised. I told him. He pondered for a moment, and then threw himself back in his chair and guffawed. ‘By St. Christopher, you shall have it, Jew—just for the joke of the thing,’ he said at last. ‘Ditomar shall have an academic ferryman.’ Then he drew his lips into a sneer, and I knew he was going to say something nasty. ‘But don’t go away with any false notions, my friend. Do you know why I do it? Not to do you a good turn—Heaven forbid!—but to show you Jews your proper place. Engineers, professorships! Pack-asses, beasts of burden, that’s

all you are fit for, and that's all you shall be. You shall find your level.' A charming man, eh? I am paid two roubles a week, not counting tips. And they charge me nothing for the chance of developing my biceps.

"Yours to command—

"NYMAN, the Stygian."

Immediately on receipt of this letter Baruch, pleading ill-health, had asked and obtained a week's leave of absence. Then he packed up a few necessary things, and, taking train for a small town in the neighbourhood of Odessa, he hired a room, and sat himself down on his low stool to observe the *shiva*, the prescribed seven days of mourning. He could not have done it at his own lodgings in the fashionable quarter without attracting unnecessary comment. It was the only resource he had of honouring the memory of his parents. No one could deprive him of that. They themselves had deprived him of seeking their earthly forgiveness for the wrong he had done them, and in the first throes of his poignant remorse, he thought that in doing so they had done him almost as great a wrong. Quite a secondary consideration with him was the meagreness of the details with which Nyman had furnished him as to the cause of their death, and the peculiar circumstance of their dying within so brief an interval of one another. Some epidemic probably. Epidemics, of a more or less fatal character, were the chief product of Ditomar. No, there was nothing significant

in Nyman's laconic intimation. Of course he wrote to ask him for greater explicitness ; but, as he half expected, Nyman had lapsed back into his previous silence.

Still, what did it matter ? The old people were dead—there was no doubt about that. Nyman was not given to practical joking. And Baruch went back to Odessa, feeling as though in those seven days he had lived a hundred years. At least, however far back he looked, he could see no landmark on the old road. The Ditomar hovel, which had sheltered his parents, had been the last of them. And now that this too was gone, he could not venture back, because he would never find the way. And so, by a skilful combination of quibbling and bravado, he tided over the crisis.

This was about six months ago, and during all that time he had, true to his resolution, turned his gaze forward and ever forward. Gradually the sense of newly found freedom and safety, with which he had resumed his daily task at the Prefecture, had become a less and less conscious factor with him, until it had merged itself into his scheme of normal routine. He had ceased to be vexed by the irksome thought of being called upon to tie up broken threads. He had begun to forget that man is the creature, as he is the creator, of circumstance, and his soul was therefore shaken to its foundations when the unexpected reminder came to him. It came by most indirect and circumambient ways.

At five o'clock that afternoon the Prefect stepped into his room.

"I shall have to take you home with me, Volkmann," he said with a disagreeable air, which, however, was clearly not intended for Baruch. "We must do the work of those two scamps to-night. The accumulations are already enormous. I must not allow them to grow."

"At your Excellency's service," replied Baruch, readily.

On arriving at the house the Prefect left Baruch in the library and himself stepped up to his wife's room.

"I have brought Volkmann home to dine with us, my dear," he said. "Have you any objection?"

"Not the least. You know I am always pleased to see him," replied the Baroness. "What is it? I can see you have had some annoyance."

"Only the usual. Onogran and de Gorski thought it time to give me another proof of being thoroughly unsatisfactory and unreliable. They know the great pressure of work I have to contend with, and yet they don't scruple to absent themselves."

"You should dismiss them," said the baroness, dryly.

"That's not so easy as it looks, my dear," the Prefect replied ruefully. "Think of the hue and cry I should stir up about my ears. You know they can bring great influence to bear at St. Petersburg. No, I'm afraid I must put up with them

until they run away of their own accord to escape their creditors. In the mean time I must content myself with being grateful to you for having given me Volkmann."

"I can hardly take any credit for that," she smiled. "It isn't that I went about with a candle by daylight looking for him. He was a mere accident."

The Prefect was pensive for a moment or two, then he turned to her with an answering smile.

"For all your modesty, however, Adèle, there is one thing for which I insist on your taking credit."

"You alarm me, Sergei," she jested.

"In fact," he continued, "it is very remiss on my part not to have expressed to you my admiration for it before."

"And therefore you waste more time over these preliminaries. May I know what you admire so much in me?"

"Among a host of other things—your attitude to Volkmann. I was afraid that, considering your first enthusiasm for him, you would not—a thousand pardons, my dear, for using the expression—you would not know exactly where to draw the line. I had an idea that you would drag him, as the greatest discovery of the age, through the drawing-rooms of your friends. But while, of course, you have treated him with invariable kindness and courtesy, you have taken care to remember the social gulf between you and one who—well, whatever his merits, his origin

is a little recent, isn't it? Still, when did I ever find occasion to complain of your tact, my dear?"

"The tact was not mine at all—it was his, Sergei," said the baroness, gravely. "It was he who insisted on my drawing the line. I offered to do for him exactly what you just now complimented me on not doing for him. I asked him to accept invitations, introductions; his answer was always the same."

"What, pray?"

"He argued it out with me. He wanted to work and not to play."

"Yes, he works. He will go far," said the Prefect, musingly.

"Well, will you let him go as far as Ditomar?" asked the baroness, with a smile.

"I don't quite understand, Adèle."

"I mean that I have had an agonized letter from Maria Koratoff. She wants us to spend our holidays with them this year. They can't get away themselves, and she and poor little Alma are boring themselves to death. We really ought to go. We have refused so many times."

"But where does Volkmann come in, my dear?" asked the Prefect.

"I want him to accompany us," explained the baroness.

"Volkmann accompany us? Impossible, Adèle," exclaimed the Prefect. "He is the junior of the three. What will they say?"

"That's exactly my point, Sergei," said the

baroness. "I want them to feel the rebuke. It will be your vote of censure on their many delinquencies. No, Sergei," she continued energetically, "I will not allow you to submit any longer to their insolence, despite their being backed up by the St. Petersburg cliques. I insist on our going to the Koratoffs and taking Volkmann with us."

"Oh, well, since you insist, my dear Adèle," the Prefect rejoined meekly.

"Thank you, Sergei," said the baroness.

"Come, Volkmann, we can do a good hour yet before dinner," entering the library briskly. "Let's show our friends that we can do very well without them and their dying relatives. Oh, by the way, before I forget, I may as well tell you so that you may have time to make your arrangements. My wife and I are starting on our holidays next week, and we have decided that you should come along with us."

"I am more delighted than I can say, your Excellency," replied Baruch, his flushed face giving token of his pleasure.

"Yes, we are going to stay for a few weeks with our friends, the de Koratoffs. I think you met Madame de Koratoff and her daughter here two years ago."

"But Madame de Koratoff lives at——" stammered Baruch.

"Yes; they are still at Ditomar. That's where we are going. Perhaps you would sooner not come. It may be too quiet for you."

"Oh, not at all, your Excellency."

"Very well then, that's settled. Now to work."

But Baruch, without letting the Prefect see it, worked with only half a brain ; the other half was busy working out the meaning of his return to Ditomar. Did it mean punishment or forgiveness, this opportunity of offering a prayer at his parents' last resting-place ?

CHAPTER V

DITOMAR was *en fête*. The Governor had given orders that the arrival of his distinguished guests should be treated as a public event, and that they should be received accordingly. The result was a few spasmodic and elementary attempts at decoration along the line of route, which a heavy rain overnight succeeded in reducing to a final state of hopeless bedragglements. There were otherwise but scanty signs of popular enthusiasm, and the posse of mounted gendarmes had little trouble in clearing a way for the two carriages conveying Monsieur and Madame de Koratoff and their guests from the railway-station to the Government House. Madame de Koratoff and the baroness were alone in the first carriage, while the Governor, the Prefect, and Volkmann followed in the second.

There was upon Volkmann an almost crushing sense of unreality and doubt. It seemed strange to him beyond all possibility of belief that this should be the manner of his return to Ditomar. The sight of the familiar scenes swept away the great mass of intervening years, and he saw himself once more the hungry, bare-footed, little urchin to whom the streets were full of vague terrors, and whom the

dimmiest suggestion of a uniform or the most distant clank of a sabre sent scampering wildly to cover. And here he was passing through these same streets, with these same uniformed men obsequious to his merest nod, and more than proud to be called upon to give him proof of their servility. Here was still the precipitous ditch wherein he and Nyman had crouched shivering on the night of their flight to escape being questioned by the patrolling policeman ; and here—his heart came into his mouth—was the house he knew so well and in the doorway of which he might, had he come a few months earlier, have seen his father and mother peeping timidly out upon the unwonted sight. The house was almost as he had left it ; things moved slowly in Ditomar, even to their decline. There were, perhaps, a few more holes in the thatch and more paper-patches in the window-panes. It was occupied again, as he could see from the multitude of little shock-heads clustering on the doorstep. Was it possible that he himself was not one of that grimy, ragamuffin crew ?

He was shaken out of his ruminations by a jolt of the carriage which had come to a sudden stop.

"We have got into a rut," said the Prefect, looking out.

"I am not surprised ; everything does that in this cursed place," replied de Koratoff, emphasizing the adjective with an additional oath. "Here's an instance in point of what I was just telling you. It will give you an idea of what I have to put up with,

my friend. I've been positively writing my fingertips off to the Ministry to let me have a few thousand roubles for patching up these gutters into some semblance of streets. The only answer I ever get is, there is no money available for improvements in outlying places like Ditomar, but that I am at liberty to get it out of the inhabitants—if I can. If I can! Just look about you," and he swung his arm round viciously. "What do you think can be squeezed out of this old lumber-hole?"

"It's very disagreeable," murmured the Prefect, sympathetically.

Volkmann had sat up and for the first time allowed his gaze to sweep more freely to the right and left of him. He was quite convinced that he was safe against recognition. He knew himself so little here, that there was no possibility of others knowing him. Here and there he encountered the quick, shifty look of some well-remembered face, and he grasped tightly at the carriage-ledge as if to prevent himself from jumping up and calling out at the top of his voice, "What are you afraid of, you fools? Look at me—why, I am only Baruch, the bootmaker's son, come here to masquerade among you as one of the mighty ones who handle your destinies." An aching sense of strangeness came over him. The intimacy, the homeliness of the scene began to exercise a subtle sway over him, and the deeper it wormed its way into his heart, the more poignantly he felt himself aloof and lonely. Why would not one of these men and women whom

he knew so well—who knew him so well if they would only exercise their perception—why would not one of them give him a long, straight look, warming up gradually into an understanding smile?

He could not make out how it was, but presently he became aware of some mysterious response to his great desire. The grooms had just succeeded in working the wheels out of the rut, when he caught a glimpse of a woman's face peering at him hard from behind a tattered strip of curtain at a window some yards ahead of him. The face had disappeared again in a flash, yet it had left on Volkmann the impression of a glance that seemed something more than the gratifying of an ordinary curiosity. There was in it a tinge of fear and startled wonder. And again, just as the carriage dashed by, he had a suggestion of great black eyes fixed upon him with glassy tenseness, and the tattered strip of curtain quivered unsteadily, as though held in place by an agitated hand. But struck as he was by the incident, it conveyed no meaning to him. Perhaps it was only his fancy. And, if it were more than that, he could not help knowing by now, despite his anchorite habits, that he had the power—unwelcome enough to him—of drawing the attention of many of the women whom he passed.

The cordial readiness with which the de Koratoffs had acceded to the baroness' request for permission to bring her husband's secretary along with them to Ditomar, was further exemplified by the preparations which Volkmann found had been made

for his comfort at the Government House. Quite a little suite of rooms—there were rooms and to spare in the big rambling building—had been set aside for his use, the appointments of which left nothing to be desired for taste or convenience. A Cossack was assigned to him to act as his valet and orderly, and de Koratoff impressed upon him that he would take it greatly amiss if he hesitated in the expression of any wish which might add still further to his well-being. And Volkmann looked out through the large bay-window from which he could survey the whole township, asking himself with a dazed wonder if his mind would ever become large enough to comprehend the full irony of the situation.

He had washed and changed his clothes in readiness for dinner, and then he found that it lacked nearly half an hour yet to the time fixed for the meal. For a few minutes he remained seated at the open window, trying to bring some order into the chaos of his thoughts, and some peace into the conflict of his emotions. Then his restlessness of spirit, in which the influence of his surroundings and the buoyant stir of the balmy summer evening subtly united, drove him out of the room. He would make his way out to the spacious garden below, where he would have a better chance of collecting himself. Striding through the long corridor he passed the drawing-room, through the open door of which he caught sight of a girlish figure moving about within noiselessly, gracefully, engaged at that particular moment in arranging some flower-vases

on the piano. He stopped involuntarily in the doorway. Ah, he had quite forgotten that he had not yet paid his respects to the daughter of his hosts. He had heard the baroness making inquiries about her at the station, but he had not felt sufficiently interested to listen to Madame de Koratoff's reply. So here she was. He recognized her easily enough even in the half-light. She had not changed much in those two years. Why should she? What was there to make her change? People who, like her, were not given to overmuch fret of mind or soul, could not be expected to register any great changes in their external appearance in so short a time. At that instant, whether by chance or design, she turned up the light and came full into his view. No, he had been wrong—she did not seem quite the same. Before he could particularize the difference she was walking towards him with hand outstretched in smiling unaffected welcome.

“How do you do, Mr. Volkmann?”

“I am delighted to meet you again, Mademoiselle de Koratoff,” he replied, with a formal ring in his voice that contrasted rather strongly with her cordiality.

He could now study the differences he thought he had observed in her at his ease. He did it with a sort of negligent curiosity, not caring very much whether she repaid study or not. The girlish angularity was gone, and with it the last traces of childhood. The porcelain daintiness of features was still there, but it seemed to have taken a harder hue. There was also a harder look in her eyes, which

only, however, made them more frank and unafraid than he remembered them. And a little tenseness at the corners of the mouth seemed to speak of lessons in restraint, the moral value of which did not compensate for their necessity. Volkmann, having arrived at this point in his observations, felt strongly inclined to laugh. He was surely allowing his fancy to play too freely; he was reading into her too much—a great deal more than she herself thought she offered to the casual eye. If he took her as he found her, it was no doubt quite as much as she expected or deserved.

She was hesitating with her next remark. When it came it seemed to be uttered on the spur of the moment.

“So it appears, Mr. Volkmann, that you did not guard against accidents.”

“What do you mean?” he asked bluntly.

“Didn’t you say last time that that was the condition on which you were likely to find yourself in Ditomar again?”

“Did I? Fancy your remembering that,” he exclaimed, astonished.

“Another accident,” she replied lightly, but colouring up. Then, to hide her embarrassment, she continued quickly: “Well, how does Ditomar strike you on further acquaintance?”

“That’s hardly fair to Ditomar, is it?” he replied thoughtfully.

“No, perhaps not. But, at any rate, we tried hard that it should look its best. We hadn’t

made allowances for the rain coming to spoil the decorations."

"What does that matter? I am sure the Prefect and the baroness have every reason to be satisfied with their welcome."

"Oh, indeed, if you knew how eagerly we have been expecting them," she cried impulsively. "You can't imagine how desperately dull we are here. Do you remember my mentioning my fears to you last time? Well, they have been more than realized."

"I don't know why they should. You should hardly be dull here. There seems plenty to do."

The abruptness of the sentences seemed to lend an intentional harshness to his words. The girl clearly did not know how to take him, for her reply oscillated between seriousness and badinage.

"Plenty to do, Mr. Volkman? What, for instance? I should be so grateful for any suggestion."

"Would you really?" he asked, his brows wrinkling.

"Yes, although you look so threatening," she replied, still inclining to the side of flippancy.

"Look at the wretchedness all around you," he said brusquely.

This time she was, or affected to be, openly amused, for she broke into a ringing laugh.

"My dear Mr. Volkmann, what a funny idea—to find distraction in contemplating the misery of others!"

"Not only in contemplating it, mademoiselle, but in relieving it."

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes opened wide like those of a bewildered child.

"I should have thought I had made it plain enough. Have you no sickness here—no starvation?"

"I believe so," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. "At any rate, papa is being continually worried by beggars of every description."

"Well!"

He flung the monosyllable at her like a challenge. In an instant her mood changed, and he could see she recognized and accepted his challenge from the way she stepped back and drew herself up haughtily.

"Really, Mr. Volkmann, this seems a little beside the point."

"Not at all," he said firmly. "You asked me for a recipe against dulness—and I gave you one."

"If you presumed to give one, you should have thought of one more suitable. The last I expected was that you should suggest to me to seek the society of—of the local riffraff and busy myself with their sordid affairs. You might have thought twice before you asked me to forget my station."

"Which, of course, is asking of you a very great deal."

She looked sharply at his quietly smiling face, and there was something of the wild-cat in the way in which she showed her white little teeth for an instant.

"I believe, Mr. Volkmann, you are trying to amuse yourself at my expense. I never allow that."

"So you told me the first time we met. You see, I also have recollections of that historic event."

She set her lips tightly before she replied—

"I think, Mr. Volkmann, we are going to be very bad friends."

"Yes, I am afraid we have started rather badly," he admitted, nonchalantly.

She turned away and busied herself once more with the flower-vases on the piano. But she did not handle them as gently as he had observed her doing it before.

"I wonder why the others are so long?" She broke the silence after a pause which she seemed to consider sufficient to re-establish relations of formal politeness between herself and him. "If you will excuse me I will go and see."

She was halfway towards the door when there were footsteps in the corridor, and a tall, good-looking young man in the uniform of a captain of dragoons stepped in with a rather unnecessary clatter of spurs. In his effeminate features he showed a strong family resemblance to *Mademoiselle de Koratoff*.

"Ah, Cousin Karol, I was just coming to look for you," she cried, her manner once more light and insouciant. "Step here, Karol, and let me do the introduction. Mr. Boris Volkmann, M. de Golgofsky's secretary,—my cousin Karol."

"Captain Larmorin, at your service," corrected the young man, bowing stiffly to Volkmann.

"I beg your pardon. I quite forgot that you had a handle and a surname," she laughed. "What do you think, Mr. Volkmann, the dear, sweet boy came the day before yesterday, quite as a surprise. And you are going to stay quite a long time, aren't you, Cousin Karol?"

"That depends, Cousin Alma," was the curt reply.

"On how much sport you get, I suppose?" said Alma, with another laugh. "Papa and mamma wouldn't let me come to the station," she continued, addressing herself to Volkmann, "because they thought I ought to stay at home to put the final touches to things here, and Cousin Karol volunteered to stay too and help me. Wasn't that good of him?"

Karol frowned.

"I don't see how these details can interest Mr. —Mr.——"

"Volkmann," prompted Volkmann, with a bow.

"I am quite sure they don't," agreed Alma. "But I just mention them to strike a more personal note, and make Mr. Volkmann feel more at home with us. But, of course, if you don't want me to do so, I won't mention a word—not even that, in your great anxiety to be of use, you broke mamma's pet *épergne*. By the way, where did you disappear to after that?"

"I took my gun and went down to the coverts,

Cousin Alma," replied Karol, visibly mollified by her interest in his doings.

"Did you have any luck?"

"Any amount. I shot a couple of hedgehogs and frightened some Jews out of their lives," laughed Karol.

"Well, that's better than nothing, isn't it, Mr. Volkmann?" asked Alma.

"I can't say. I'm not a good judge of what constitutes sport," the latter replied dryly.

"You say that as if it was something to boast about, Mr. er—er Volkmann," sneered Karol, who had been measuring Volkmann with a not too friendly glance.

Volkmann was spared the trouble of a reply by the entrance of the two elder couples. They made a merry group, Monsieur and Madame de Koratoff being evidently in high feather at the arrival of their guests. There seemed every indication that it would be a most successful visit. Indeed, what cause did they have for misgivings or suspicions of sinister issues to attend such smiling auspices? Laughingly the Governor gave his arm to the baroness.

"Oh dear, there's a lady short!" exclaimed Madame de Koratoff, in mock despair.

"Easily remedied, you foolish creature," said the Governor, cheerily. "The two youngsters must take Alma in between them."

The two men instantly offered their arms. Alma looked with coquettish hesitation from one

to the other. Then, with a laugh, she slipped past them.

"No, thank you; it's so ignominious to be halved like that, papa. I'll take myself in whole, if you don't mind," she cried, with a mischievous nod at Karol.

Karol dashed after her, quivering with delight. Mother of God! what devils these women were for cleverness, and his Cousin Alma was the biggest devil of them all. To prevent herself taking the arm of the other fellow, she would take that of neither!

Baruch followed them slowly, and took his seat at her side without a word. She was half turning her back to him as she sat, of course to imply that he was still under her displeasure, and that he must not mistake the armistice she had granted him for a complete cessation of hostilities. Baruch laughed to himself. This flighty scatterbrain had evidently engaged in a violent flirtation with the tailor's dummy she called cousin, and wished to employ him as her stalking-horse. In Heaven's name, let her, if she wanted to. She repaid him amply by the amusement he derived from her manœuvres. But it would be well for her if she instilled into him nothing more than this contemptuous amusement. He could not combat his utter repugnance, not so much against her own personality, but in so far as she typified the atmosphere of this house and of the class to which she took such manifest pride in belonging. She embodied for him the decadent social tone, the

degenerate moral system by which even such as she, still young and plastic enough to be amenable to better influences, had been drilled into meeting all appeals to her higher self with a front of obdurate and hide-bound egotism.

Well, what did it matter? It was really no business of his. He had not come here to make sociological studies. He was here merely in the ordinary course of office routine, and any pleasure he derived from the visit was only the knowledge, the additional proof it gave him of how firmly he had established himself in his master's affections and confidence. Otherwise, his emotional side had no place here. He might look upon himself as a machine which had to turn out so much work a day at his superior's bidding. And when this visit was over, he might or might not succeed in eradicating it from his memory as a disagreeable experience.

The meal proceeded slowly and tediously for him, not because he felt no interest in the general conversation, in which he himself joined but sparingly, but because he was impatient to be free to follow out the one personal object of his coming. He wanted to see Nyman, to speak to him about his parents, to ask him to point out to him the place where they were buried. He had not looked out for him along the route from the station. He knew Nyman was not the sort of man to go an inch out of his way for anything that might be taken to pander to ordinary human curiosity. Volkmann remembered him answering once, when he was asked to witness

the procession of a great personage through the streets of Odessa, that he would not put his head out of the window to see a cavalcade of archangels riding down the Milky Way. If only this interminable meal were over!

Presently Madame de Koratoff gave the signal to rise.

The Prefect and the Governor had been confabulating with lowered voices towards the end of the meal. The Prefect had occasionally shot a solicitous glance at Volkmann.

"I don't care what your opinion is, my friend," de Koratoff was saying heatedly to the Prefect as they rose to their feet, "I have always had my policy, and am determined to abide by it. Kindness is thrown away on them. A firm hand, a tight squeeze by the scruff, intimidation, terrorism, if you like—take my word for it, that's the only way of dealing with these dogs. What do you say, Volkmann?"

"Which dogs, your Excellency?" smiled Volkmann.

The Prefect held up an imperative hand.

"Hush, de Koratoff! I won't have you say another word about it. I haven't come here to discuss controversial questions. I get as much of that as I require for my comfort in Odessa. Come along. We'll follow the ladies to the drawing-room."

"Have one of mine? I can recommend them. In the regiment they say I'm the best connoisseur of cigarettes," said Karol, sauntering up to Volkmann, the open case in his hand.

"Thanks," replied Volkmann, taking one.

"Seems you didn't have much to say for yourself over dinner," continued Karol, affably.

"Well, why should I?"

"Oh, because, somehow, you look the sort of chap who could say a great deal if he wanted to," explained Karol, the geniality of his mood still growing.

Baruch understood perfectly. Karol was flushed with victory—and perhaps also a little with wine. It was evident that he had found his fears of the other as a possible rival quite ungrounded, for all during dinner Alma had devoted herself to him with pointed exclusiveness. And, like the overgrown schoolboy he was, he could not resist flaunting, as he thought, his good fortune in the other's face.

Volkmann was fidgetting, not knowing how to make his escape.

"Let's go and have a game of billiards," suggested Karol.

"I am very sorry—I can't play billiards."

Karol adopted an openly commiserating air. Poor fellow of a quill-driver, who didn't know what sport meant, and couldn't even handle a cue! And he had demeaned himself into feeling a moment's jealousy of him!

Alma came back into the room on some ostensible, though not very apparent, household errand. Volkmann seized the opportunity.

"I hope I won't seem rude if I desert you," he said.

"Oh?" There seemed something of disappointment in her exclamation.

"I should like to see how much of Ditomar I remember."

"Couldn't you do that better in the daytime?" she said distantly.

"I would prefer to do it now."

"You are perfectly at liberty to do as you please, Mr. Volkmann."

"Thank you. I shall go to make my excuses to your mother. By the way, I am delighted your cousin Karol did not become a Caucasian bandit."

Before she could reply he was gone, and Karol was standing before her.

"What was that he said? I thought I heard him mention my name," he said suspiciously.

"I couldn't quite catch what he said, Cousin Karol," was Cousin Alma's somewhat snappy reply.

CHAPTER VI

THE approach to the ferry was a nondescript path trodden here and there into some semblance of a footway by the tramp of those passing down to the riverside. The ferry, however, was not an institution which enjoyed any very great popularity. The fare across cost two copecks, and was it not a positive crime to squander such a lot of money—as money went in Ditomar—on a ride of five minutes, when it could be saved by using the bridge a mile and a half further up? It only meant that your feet throbbed a little more, and there was an additional twinge or two to your aching back, especially on the homeward journey; but what was that to the joy of two copecks saved? Every morning saw the straggling exodus of the Jewish hawkers trudging sturdily across the bridge to the other side of the river, where civilization was said to begin and where most of Ditomar earned its alleged livelihood. Every evening they returned, a limp, jaded crew, sometimes heartened by a little margin of profit, more often heavy with the thought of a futile day behind them, and certain of nothing but of going through the same hazardous routine on the morrow. And then they passed the ferry, and gave thanks to God that however

bad things were, they were not as bad as they might be. For poor as they were, they might easily have been poorer by two copecks still. It restored to them their optimism. And the heavy, lumbering hulk that passed for a ferry-boat, never received the credit for being the great moral influence it really was.

Still, there were quite a number of people in Ditomar who used the ferry every now and then, such as the members of the Governor's household and his staff, the priest, the doctor, and a few other people who did not have to count their incomes by farthings. The department over which de Koratoff ruled was one of the smallest in the Russian empire, but small as it was it was intersected by the broad Dnieper, and so suffered from the curious geographical anomaly that Ditomar, the seat of the government, stood almost isolated on one side of the river, whilst the main portion of the administrative district continued on the side opposite. Despite its being the centre of authority, Ditomar contained no troops except the small detachment of Cossacks who acted as the Governor's bodyguard ; while the two regiments allotted to the department for the maintenance of law and order, and more especially for the enforcement of tithes and taxes from the more recalcitrant children of the Little Father, were stationed on the other side of the river, two miles inland, in the barracks at Korsk. It was this circumstance which, although there was telegraphic communication between the two places, occasioned the chief use of the ferry and

made the ferryman's post no sinecure. And, indeed, whoever did or did not do his duty in Ditomar, it had to be admitted that the man who drove that unwieldy craft edgeways against the swift swirl of the current was worthy of his hire.

It was this thought which, combined with feelings of pity and longing, hurried Baruch impetuously down the final stretch of incline leading down to the riverside, heedless of the squelching foot-holes that made him stumble at almost every other step. Now that he was so near he wondered how he had succeeded in controlling so long his overmastering eagerness for the sight and sound of the friend of his heart. In those moments it became clear to him that the friendship they had pledged to each other at parting, more than two years ago, was, to him, at least, still a real living thing, which did not need the galvanizing spur of sudden emotional stress to make it assert its strength. Now he knew that it had been there all the time, obscured, perhaps, by the louder and more blatant calls of his new life, but drawing a serenely regular breath, secure in its own vital insistence. Oh, to fancy that he was, instantly almost, to see Nyman again! His eyes strained ahead through the last flicker of the evening twilight, and caught sight of a figure huddling forward on a tree-stump, the head bent low as though in sleep. Baruch covered the last few yards, but still without attracting attention from the stooping figure.

"Nyman," he said, touching him gently on the shoulder.

Nyman jumped up, and the volume over which he had been bending, sleeping or awake, fell between his knees. With a throb of heart-ache Baruch recognized in the book the well-thumbed Horace of old.

"All right—step in," said Nyman, gruffly, preparing to lead the way to the ferry.

"Nyman!" Baruch cried again.

The other faced him with a start, but the sudden quiver of surprise into which he had allowed himself to be betrayed, gave place again presently to a stony stolidness.

"Ah, it's you, is it?" he said nonchalantly. "I fancied you would turn up one of these days."

"But it's no longer your fancy, Nyman," cried Baruch. "I have come—I have really come. Oh, Nyman, Nyman, why so cruelly cold to me? Aren't we brothers any more?"

"Welcome, Baruch," said Nyman, holding out a steady hand.

"No, no, that's not good enough," said Baruch, sternly.

And then, the next moment, he was straining the other to him in a close embrace. Nyman offered no resistance. At length he disengaged himself gently, took a few strides away from Baruch, and came back again. There was a pregnant pause, during which, however, their thoughts communed plainly enough with one another. It was Baruch who broke the silence.

"Why did you do it, Nyman? Why pretend

to treat me as a stranger?" he asked reproachfully. "You hurt me terribly."

"I am sorry, Baruch," replied Nyman, passing his hand across his forehead with a gesture of infinite weariness. "I don't know myself why I did it. Oh, believe me, I have been picturing this meeting to myself every moment of the day, and now that it has come—— And yet, now that I come to think of it, I suppose it's only natural that a man whose business it is every day of his life to strain against the current, should grow a little perverse in his ways—eh, Baruch?"

But Baruch did not reply. He was struck dumb by the abysmal hopelessness, the measureless misery of Nyman's tone and manner, of which the veneer of jauntiness that coloured them was but a pitifully futile disguise.

"Oh yes, yes, that's it, Baruch," continued Nyman, rubbing his hands gleefully. "It's this confounded river that did it—my eternal struggle with this confounded river. That's the revenge it takes on me. It knows I am its strongest enemy. I conquer it a dozen times a day, and so, for pure spite, it makes the blood-waves rush through my heart all crossways and contrary. Yes, that's what it does. At last I've solved the riddle. I can now make out a lot of things that used to puzzle me. Oh, pillar of fire by night, you did well to come. And now let me turn the tables and scold you. Why didn't you let me have word of your coming?"

"I did not—purposely," said Baruch, sadly. "I

had to punish you somehow for ignoring all my letters."

"Punish me? Oh, bless you for that word," cried Nyman, exultantly. "Thank God that somebody still thinks me man enough to be worthy of punishment. Now I am all right again, Baruch. Now we can talk properly. Let's sit here on this trunk. Begin."

"Where shall I begin?" asked Baruch, uneasily.

"Wherever you like. No, stay—let me put you a question or two. How do you stand with your studies? Have you taken your doctorate yet?"

"N—no," stammered Baruch.

"What? You don't mean to say that you have failed—you, Baruch Volkmann?"

"I did not fail. I never went in for my examination. Shortly after you left I changed my plans."

"Changed to what? Did you go into business?"

"No; into the bureaucratic service."

Nyman laughed.

"Yes, you became Viceroy of Tartary," he said.

"No, it's true," replied Baruch, harshly. "The Prefect offered me a secretaryship."

Nyman pondered a moment and then started up.

"And that, of course, meant the usual thing," he said slowly.

"It meant the usual thing," echoed Baruch; "but beyond saying that, it's no use our discussing it. It was too brilliant a chance, and I did not have the strength to thrust it away. So much only I will

tell you. I accepted it in the first instance—I will at least have the grace not to play the hypocrite to you—because it meant the satisfying of my insatiable ambition, an immeasurable step forward on the road of worldly advancement. And further, somewhere vaguely at the back of my mind there was the thought, the redeeming hope, that by gaining admission into the enemy's camp I might stealthily, craftily find the opportunity of being of service to the people of my race. I can't say I have found that opportunity yet. But I am looking for it night and day. And now you have a right to treat me as a stranger, to show your protest if and how you like." He waited a moment, and then rose and took a step aside. "Say the word—shall I leave you?"

Nyman tapped his foot rhythmically, as though keeping time to the tune of his thoughts. Then he said grimly—

"My line is barge-poles, not homiletics. If Heaven has ordained that the rulers of this blessed land should be all Christians, then it is Heaven's affair, not mine."

Baruch reseated himself.

"Very well, Nyman," he said matter-of-fact. "Now, what else do you want to know?"

"The reason for your coming."

"My master, the Prefect, is paying a visit to the de Koratoffs. He asked me to accompany him."

"And are you staying with him—at de Koratoff's?"

There was a keen furtiveness in Nyman's manner of putting the question.

"Naturally. Where else?"

"That is to say, you yourself are staying with de Koratoff?" iterated Nyman.

"I have already told you so." Baruch's lips grew tense as he continued: "Why do you insist on that? What is there that strikes you so strangely about it?"

"Well, doesn't it strike you as strange, Baruch?" said Nyman. "When you were last in Ditomar, the one thing in the world which did not occur to you was that you would ever be staying with de Koratoff as a guest—isn't that so?"

"It is, Nyman; but, for all that, you will not hoodwink me," said Baruch, his voice rising. "Tell me what there is at the bottom of your question."

Nyman bent his head low, and presently Baruch saw his whole frame heaving with suppressed laughter.

"I will laugh too, if you will tell me what there is to laugh at," said Baruch, binding his patience in fetters of steel.

"You see, the situation faces both ways—there is a humorous and also a serious view to it. I rather think you will take the serious view," said Nyman, looking up at Baruch. Then his mood changed suddenly to an access of suppressed fury. "Well, if you will have it, you are welcome to the knowledge. If you are staying with de Koratoff, you are living under the roof, you are enjoying the hospitality

of the man who, before God, is answerable for the death of your father and mother."

Baruch did not reply immediately. His arm lifted slowly and closed with a vice-like grip on Nyman's shoulder.

"Nyman, tell me everything. How did my parents die?" he asked at last.

"Miserably, terribly, like beasts of the field—hunted to their death," Nyman broke out fiercely.

A deep breath from Baruch told him of the effect of his words.

"But before I go on," he said, moderating his heat, "I should advise you to let go your hold of my shoulder. You are only hurting yourself. My collar-bone is the hardest in Ditomar and for fifty miles round."

Baruch released him and seated himself brokenly in his former place on the prostrate trunk.

"That's better," continued Nyman. "Now listen. It was some time before last Christmas when we noticed that the mujiks hereabouts were getting possessed of the devil. They were looking black at us. Something was brewing—we knew the symptoms. But we were determined not to be caught this time, as had happened at other times, like rats in a hole. We would take our precautions. We sent a petition to de Koratoff, and insisted respectfully on our right to his protection. He treated us to soft words. He said we had no grounds for our suspicions—there was absolutely no danger. And, besides, he himself

would do for us all he could. We dared not ask him what he meant by that, whether he meant it honestly, or as a sinister sarcasm. What could we do? We had to content ourselves with his promise, such as it was. But not quite. We kept watch ourselves. We watched for a week—two weeks, three, until we were worn out with the strain, and only too glad to lull ourselves into the thought of safety. But the mujiks, too, the crafty dogs, knew how to bide their time. They also waited and watched. And then, one bitter winter night, the storm broke, taking us all unawares and unprepared. Your parents fled with the others to the forest to await there the help that might or might not come with daybreak. And so, the poor old things, half crazed with fear and cold, I suppose, straggled away from the main body, losing themselves and blundering aimlessly into the trackless maze of the forest paths. And there they were found two days later, clasped in each other's stiffened arms. That's how they died, Baruch. They might have been living now, but for de Koratoff's promises."

Baruch had risen towards the end of the narrative and now stood towering over his friend, dire and threatening.

"Why did you not write me all this at the time?" he exclaimed, with a sob in his voice.

Nyman shook his head.

"I took very good care that I did not."

"But why? Why make this mystery of it?"

"And suppose I had told you the truth at the

time," said Nyman, quietly, "what would have happened?"

Baruch stared stonily into the gathering darkness.

"You know as well as I what would have happened," continued Nyman. "You would have come rushing here, a very hurricane of senseless fury; you would have forced your way into de Koratoff's presence, you would have stormed and raged, you would have let your tongue run loose and unbridled for a minute or two—he would not have given you more time than that—and afterwards? Chains, gaolers, rotting alive in a subterranean pest-hole—pending investigations. They would not have even let you get as far as Siberia. Was it worth paying such a price for the luxury of telling a scoundrel the truth? No, no, Baruch, that would have been a very tame ending to the miracle of Odessa, wouldn't it? I wasn't such an idiot as to allow that."

Baruch stood petrified, then he collected himself with a great effort. His faculties were coming back to him.

"But you are an idiot," he cried fiercely. "What man ever reaped reward for frittering away his brain in forethought for even his nearest and dearest? And do you really expect me to thank you for what you did? Never; if I forgive you for it, it is as much as I shall ever do. Come what would, you should not have kept me away from here. You should have summoned me here to my ruin, even if the thought of having been my death had

haunted you all the rest of your days. You should have let me come—you should have let me come.”

“Hush ! for God’s sake don’t shout ; you don’t know who may hear,” whispered Nyman warningly, as, with gentle force, he pulled him down and made him sit next to him.

So the two sat for a good while, Baruch burying his face in his hands. Occasionally Nyman heard him mutter, “Oh, my poor mother !” the words tagging off into a despairing whimper. Then gradually he became very quiet, sitting up more and more rigidly until, with sudden resoluteness, he lifted his head high, and turned with abrupt vehemence towards his companion.

“And now, Nyman, tell me what I can do.”

“What can you do ? Nothing,” replied Nyman, slowly.

“No, that’s not true. I can do something—you know I can. You know you meant me to do something, Nyman, or else you would not have let a syllable of this escape your lips. Out with it—what do you want me to do ?”

Nyman stretched out his hands, and, gripping Baruch by the arm, crept closer and closer to him till the immediate contact of his body told Baruch of the tempest of vindictive hatred that was shaking the other from head to foot.

“Yes, Baruch,” he whispered, “I admit there was a deep, dark purpose in all that I have said to you. When I saw that you had come, when I heard to whom you had come, the thought flashed

upon me that Heaven at last meant to shape its seemingly disordered policies towards their appointed issue, and I dared not remain silent. True, I did not send for you, but when——”

Baruch, however, broke in on him with an impatient gesture.

“To whom are you making excuses? Speak! What is to be done?”

“Yes, yes, I am coming to that now,” Nyman hastened to assure him. “There is only one way of dealing with him. Let it be blood for blood. You have every opportunity. You are staying in the house; you have the full run of it. No one will be the wiser, no one will suspect you—who should dream that you have a motive to do him injury? In a day or two everything can be ready for you. I haven’t forgotten all my chemistry. I still remember how to make nitro-glycerine. I dare say I can find an old tin can somewhere. The rest is for you. Place it where you think best—where he has the least chance of escaping it. Time the fuse to your convenience. Look out for yourself, and consider no one else. If need be, send the whole brood of them to hell—but see that he does not escape you.”

Fixedly he watched for Baruch’s answer. He could see that Baruch was debating his plan with himself, and waited patiently, being sure that the longer the other spent in its consideration, the more convincingly it would come home to him. But he was mistaken. Presently he saw Baruch’s teeth

gleam white through the darkness in the strained smile that parted his lips.

"No, no, my dear Nyman, that won't do at all," he said, shaking his head decisively. "You have gone very wide of the mark."

"I have not, Baruch," said Nyman, with equal decision. "It is the quickest, the safest, the most thorough."

"And yet it won't do for me," insisted Baruch.

"By heavens, you are afraid!" Nyman flung at him.

Baruch disposed of the accusation with a shoulder-shrug.

"I would kill him, Nyman," he said, in a tone that admitted no doubt of his sincerity, "I would kill him as readily as I would flick a speck of dust from my coat. I would strike him to the heart, with all his myrmidons around him, even if I knew I would be torn limb from limb the next instant. The safety of your plan does not recommend it to me. Quick it may be, but thorough it is not. What zest is there in one's revenge, what edge, when the punished man does not know why he is punished? If I killed him by your method it would be the best way of making him forget that he is being punished at all."

"You have kept up your logic, it seems," said Nyman, bitterly.

"As you your chemistry," retorted Baruch. "And, therefore, Nyman, let me work along the

lines which my logic will lay down for me. Believe me, I will get to my goal as effectively."

"But I still don't follow you," said Nyman, wavering.

"Yes, you have a right to ask me to be more explicit. Only, in the first place, I want you to trust me that I am seeking no subterfuge. As sure as I live, Nyman, as sure as my parents have died, it is my solemn purpose not to let him go unscathed for their death. But my vengeance must be more subtle, more gradually agonizing, and less catastrophic than the one you suggest. It must reach its climax, not in his dead body, but in his living heart, it must gnaw away there with remorseless, unrelenting tooth, until his whole being is honeycombed through and through with the poison of pain."

"That sounds good," cried Nyman, eagerly. "Go on, Baruch."

"No, no, that I can't do. Don't ask me to tell you what I mean. I don't know yet myself. A dim faint glimmer of it is hovering on the edge of my consciousness. He has a daughter—de Koratoff has a daughter—— No, don't let me speak of it. I can't say what shape it will take, or even whether it will ever take shape. But I shall try, Nyman—trust me, I shall try hard—very hard."

An exultant cry broke from his listener.

"And you will succeed, Baruch. Oh, it's glorious to hear you talk like that. You are right, perfectly right. My idea was crude, primitive, amateurish. But you—I can see you are going to take this work

in hand like an artist. Your vengeance will be a consummate work of art. Oh, I know you mean to do something terrible."

"Yes, Nyman, if only I can make it terrible enough. Here's my hand on it. But you must give me free play. You must not hamper me, you must not ask me to give you account of what I do. Let me go my own way and at my own pace—will you?"

"Of course I will, Baruch," cried Nyman; "I can promise you that with all my heart. I will wait patiently—oh, so patiently!—till you come and tell me it is accomplished and ask me to rejoice with you. And to prove to you that I am sincere, I shall make a confession. I have deceived you, Baruch."

"Deceived me?" echoed the latter, taken aback.

"I have not been quite frank with you, if that sounds better," continued Nyman. "You thought, no doubt, that in urging you on to seek redress for your wrongs I was only trying to set you right with yourself—that I was wholly disinterested and had no axe of my own to grind. Did you guess that I was making you my cat's-paw? Listen. I have hated de Koratoff with a deadly hatred ever since he made me ferryman of Ditomar, ever since, in his own words, he made me find my level. He did me a favour—he gave me a livelihood, but there are some men whom one must not forgive even the favours they do you. Only, being just, I did not think that he quite deserved death for it. But

when you came, you with your terrible incentive, I thought I would make you fight your own righteous battle along this pin-prick quarrel of mine. So don't keep all the joy of your vengeance for yourself. Let me have a tiny little share in it—will you, Baruch?"

Baruch had turned away.

"Where shall I find my parents, Nyman?" he asked, half choking over the words.

"Ah, yes, your parents. Go to them, Baruch," said Nymann, eagerly. "They will help you to think out your plan. I dare not come with you. We must not be seen together, or it may spoil everything. You will find them at the further end of the cemetery, the last two graves. Nobody has died since—that is, excepting those who have not died and yet do not live."

"Good night, Nyman. I shall see you again soon."

"No sooner than you can. Don't waste yourself on me. I know you have work to do. Good night."

CHAPTER VII

WITH swift, unhesitating step Baruch set out for the burial-ground. It was well that he knew the way, for all along the lonely paths, unlit save by a handful of early stars, he met no one of whom he might have inquired his direction. And yet, as he strode along, wrapping the solitude about him like a cloak, he could not divest himself of the feeling that he was not quite alone. Somewhere upon his outskirts there seemed to hang a vague presence keeping a cautious distance and yet clinging intrusively to his tracks. Once or twice he faced about abruptly, to see if he was being followed, and meeting nothing but the unresponsive shapes of the corpses through which he was passing, pushed on the more quickly with a muttered word of self-disapprobation for his fancifulness. Who should follow him? Who should concern himself with his doings here? There was only Nyman, and Nyman, at his own suggestion, had stayed behind, knowing that his cause was safe in Baruch's hands, and quite content to let it remain at that. It would, indeed, have been far stranger, thought Volkmann, if this sense of obsession had not been upon him. Within this last half-hour a new and all-overshadowing element

had come into his life, a new purpose so strong and individual that he might easily conceive it to take a separate shape to itself, following closely at his heels, or even leading the way, through the immediate days to come, and, perhaps, far out into the measureless distances of the future. Had he lived in pagan times he might have thought that his unseen companion, whose hovering propinquity he could not help resenting, was the dread goddess, Nemesis herself, come in tangible form to supervise the grim functions of her office.

He pulled himself together and concentrated his thoughts upon his errand. A quarter of an hour later he was entering the cemetery. That, too, was almost as he had left it, dingy, neglected, choked with weeds and evil-growing things. It was marked off from its environments only by the double ring of wire stretched on decaying logs at long intervals. He remembered that shortly before he had gone away there had been an agitation among the Ditomar community to surround the cemetery with a stone wall. There had been a meeting of all its members, there had been impassioned speeches, and everybody had been most earnest and enthusiastic over the pious project. The estimated cost had been five hundred roubles, and in the ten years which had passed since then Ditomar had not yet saved that magnificently paltry sum to protect its defenceless dead against thoughtless or wilful desecration. Volkmann made a mental note of the fact.

Slowly he pursued his way among the dishevelled, disconsolate graves. And presently he had reached his destination, as Nyman had said, right at the further end of the burial-ground. Here was the stone which Nyman had put upon them—one stone for the two graves. Volkmann could not read the inscription, but he bent down and pressed his lips to the slab. Perhaps that kiss would convey to the sleepers beneath something of what he would have given the remainder of his life to whisper into their waking ear. There was one thing which they should, one thing that they must know—namely, that the rest of his years would be one long atonement for that single night whereon, during all those trickling minutes, they sipped their full of the bottomless bitterness of death. That he wanted them to know, and just one other thing besides. He would compensate them royally for his neglect of them during their lifetime. He would pay a tribute to their memory which would not stop short of any sacrifice the payment might require of him. To make up for having given them nothing, nothing would now do save to give them everything. That life had been cruel to them, could now be only a vain regret. But that they had died cruelly was a positive, practical fact, the cause and consequence of which should be the predominating influence in his future.

And he, what did he ask of them? Only a sign, an inspiration to prove to him that his atonement would be acceptable to them. He would not put

on them all the burden of his task. Some vague notion of the lines on which to build the scheme of his revenge had already struck him before he left Nyman. He had thought of de Koratoff's daughter, the petulant, April-weather child-woman with the shifting glint of amethyst in her eyes—were they amethyst? He would find out. It would be part of his scheme to find out. He had never before looked into a woman's eyes, and he would look into hers with all the accumulated strength of his long reserve. She should feel all the masculine mesmeric force of his personality, till she melted like wax into his hands, till she lay helplessly prostrate at his feet, and once he had attained to that. . . . He uttered a cry of joy. As he stood staring at the shadowy outline of the two graves, there flashed upon his groping brain a gleam of light that led him straight and unswerving through the labyrinthine tangle of his thoughts to his goal. Yes, he had found his plan. Oh, that glorious plan—to strike at the heart of the man he hated with the hand of one whom that man loved best! No synhedrin of lost angels could have thought of anything to improve on that. So be it then. It only remained for him to dove-tail the details, to fasten up the disjointed ends into the inevitable noose they were to make for de Koratoff's, the assassin's neck. That he could afford to leave to another time, another place.

With a last long look he turned to go. Reverently, deferentially, as though he were issuing from the audience-chamber of a prince, he closed the

crazy little gate, and with a brief reconnoitring glance, set off briskly on his way back. But he had not taken more than a few paces when he was brought to an abrupt halt as a dark figure suddenly loomed up before him. In a flash his mind harked back to the startled stare of wonder on the woman's face he had seen at the window that afternoon.

"What do you want?" he asked harshly.

"Baruch—my Baruch," whispered the woman, "oh, don't you know me?"

"Malka!" he exclaimed.

Once his first start of surprise was over, a strong sense of the ridiculous came upon him. What an anti-climax to all his high imaginings! The mysterious presence, which he had magnified into some great attendant auspice of his undertaking, was nothing more than little black Malka, as he had called her in the old days, dogging his footsteps by some means and for some purpose of her own. And yet as he fixed her more closely standing before him in the star-haze, with her bloodless face outlimned against the framework of the semi-gloom, the thick tangle of her hair coiling heavily about her shoulders, and the restless eyes flashing shuttle-wise beneath the long, half-closed lids, she was perhaps a not unworthy presentment of a Nemesis incarnate.

Her breath came short and fast, as though she were gathering herself up for some great effort, and then her words rushed forth with a torrent-like impetuosity.

"I knew I was mistaken. It couldn't possibly

be as I thought. You haven't forgotten me, you couldn't have forgotten me so utterly, despite all these numberless years. Only when I saw the meaningless look with which you responded to mine to-day, my heart stopped, stopped so long till I thought it would never start beating again. Oh, I recognized you at once as you sat there in the carriage, with those great people next to you, and the soldiers keeping guard all around you. No, but they couldn't guard you against my knowing you again. I should have known you in a million. And do you know why—oh, don't you want to know why, Baruch? Because those dear eyes of yours have been looking into mine every minute of the day and night since you went away from here, and now—oh, blessed Heaven, can I believe it?—you have come back at last!”

“Yes, yes, I have come back,” he said soothingly; “for a little while, that is. Only you mustn't make such a to-do about it, you must be sensible, Malka.”

And gently he disengaged his hand, which, towards the conclusion of her words, she had clasped with frantic pressure between both her own.

“Oh, don't be afraid. I shall be very, very sensible,” she promised him, humbly. “Only just give me time to realize that I am speaking to you—to you, Baruch.”

“How is it you met me here?” he asked with a sudden thought.

“I tracked you from the ferry. I saw you speaking to Nyman there, and followed.”

He repressed a cry of alarm.

"And you heard what we were speaking about?"

"I said I saw you talking," she replied, "I could not hear anything distinctly. I only noticed you were both very excited—you seemed to have some stirring business between you. Oh, but don't listen to Nyman. He wants to urge you on to some dangerous work, I am sure he does. Don't do it, Baruch. Don't put yourself into peril, let things be as they are. You can't get any good out of listening to Nyman. Shield yourself from harm, Baruch, or how can you expect Heaven to shield you?"

Her appeal left a disagreeable impression on his mind. It seemed to him uncalled-for and inopportune. Just now, when he had arrived at his resolve, was surely not the time to cross his heart with misgivings. He was in a mood which craved hungrily for encouragement and support, not for the raven's croak of an ill-omened remonstrance. He showed his displeasure in the harsh tone of his reply.

"You seem to have some grievance against Nyman. Are you not friends?"

"Yes, we are friends right enough," she answered slowly, "but he wants us to be more than friends, and I can't, Baruch—oh, I can't."

"I understand," said Volkmann.

In a flash he saw the complete tragedy of Nyman's life, grimmer, gloomier even than he had

dared to suspect, the bitterness of his disappointed career intensified by the passion-play of his heart.

"And therefore," he continued fiercely, "instead of keeping out of his way—instead of allowing him to forget—you come to see him at the ferry at dark of night. Is that how you expect to repair the mischief?"

"Oh, but, indeed, I do keep out of his way," she assured him eagerly; "and I didn't go down to the ferry to-night for his sake. I wanted to ask him about you—whether he knew anything of your return. All the afternoon I wrestled with myself, if it was possible that my eyes had played me false; and then, as a last resource, I made up my mind——"

She broke off with a gesture of disdain.

"Why do you make me talk of him so much, Baruch?" she continued, her tone changing to one of fawning servility. "I—I haven't come here to talk to you about him. There are plenty of other people to whom I might do that."

"Then what have you come for?" he asked, softening at sight of her distress.

"Can't you guess, Baruch? To talk to you about yourself—to get an answer from you to the thousand questions that are whirling through my brain."

"Ah, Malka, I am afraid this is hardly the opportunity for it," he said gently. "I must get back. They will be wondering what has become of me."

"They?" she echoed reflectively. "Oh yes, I know. The people in the big house, you mean. Oh, I always knew my Baruch would become something great, and speak with all the great folks as equal to equal. Perhaps you will one day even speak to the Emperor!" she concluded, with bated breath.

"That's hardly likely, Malka," he smiled.

"And so, of course, you will be ashamed of having been playmate to a poor drudge of a seamstress," she went on wistfully.

"I shall always have your welfare at heart," he replied evasively, as he turned to leave her. "We shall have a long talk another time."

"To be sure we shall," she cried joyously, standing in front of him to impede his step. "There is only one word more I want to say to you to-night, Baruch—only one word."

"Well, what is it?" he said patiently.

"I have something to confess to you," she said, sinking her voice to a whisper. "Oh, I hope you won't be cross with me for it. Sometimes, you know, Baruch, when I had stroked you to sleep in my lap as we sat by the riverside in those days. . . ." She paused, and then went on a little incoherently, "And then, you know, I sent Nyman away on some pretext or other; and when we were alone—I kissed you gently, very gently, so that you shouldn't wake up. And you never did wake up—you never stirred. Did—did you ever feel that I kissed you, Baruch?"

"That was a child's whim, and this is a child's

talk, Malka," he said, but not unkindly. "Remember we are grown up now."

"Yes, we are man and woman now—it's a long time ago," she sighed. "Well, good night, Baruch."

His pity for her welled up in a flood. He could not let her go huddling herself up in that disconsolate wretchedness of hers. After all, as she had reminded him, they had been playmates together.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Malka?" he asked.

She looked at him, astonished at that new note of his solicitude.

"No, thank you, Baruch," she replied gratefully. "I have everything I want. I am making a good living for myself."

"For yourself. And your grandmother?"

"She has been dead these six years."

"And so you are living all by yourself now."

"Why not?" she said, with a flickering smile. "I am not afraid. The mice won't run away with me, as the saying is."

"And when the riots were here last year—I suppose you fled with the rest."

She cast an involuntary glance at the two graves near which they were still standing.

"I did not. Would to God I had! For then, perhaps——" She broke off when she saw from his tightening lips that he understood what she meant. "I stayed behind, and hid myself in the cellar. I was not unprotected. I took with me

the shears with which I cut my linen—they are long and taper off to a sharp point at the bottom, almost like a dagger.”

“You were mad—a pair of shears against a ravening mob!” he exclaimed. “What use would they have been if they had found you?”

“The shears were not for the mob—they were for me, Baruch,” she answered, smiling.

And so, if the mob had found her, there would have been another life that de Koratoff would have had to account for. The thought shook him awake. He was wasting time.

“Good night, Malka.”

“Good night, Baruch. And, by your parents’ memory, do not expose yourself to danger.”

She did not know how much sting there was in her very warning to drive him into what she warned him against. It was only at the entrance to the Government House that he slackened his step to put on an unconcerned and unsuspecting demeanour. He found everybody still assembled in the drawing-room. The two elder ladies received him cordially, and made him sit close to them. With Alma he had exchanged a casual look as he entered; and after that look she had turned forthwith back to Karol, with whom she was sitting halfway out upon the verandah. Baruch suppressed a significant smile. He would change all that presently. He bided his opportunity. It came shortly before the whole house-party broke up for bed.

“Mademoiselle de Koratoff,” he said, stepping

up to her and utterly ignoring Karol, who was standing at her elbow with a complacent air of proprietorship about him, "we agreed just before dinner that we had made a bad start. I would ask you a great favour. Shall we agree to make another?"

She hesitated with her reply. His words filled her with vague pleasure, but there seemed something sinister in his geniality. Then she replied slowly—

"Certainly, Mr. Volkmann—if you think it is any use."

"It will certainly be of use to me, mademoiselle."

And, laughing, he held out his hand to her, noting with a grim satisfaction that she responded faintly to his pressure. Yes, it was good—he had made, indeed, a good start. Nyman would have been pleased had he known.

Cousin Karol was by no means pleased. He sat up long after everybody else had retired, smoking one after another of his own special brand of cigarettes, for the excellence of which, according to his statement, he was famous in the regiment. Nevertheless, they were useless in helping him to puzzle out all this talk about making a fresh start. If anybody could talk about making a start it was he—in fact, he could talk of having made considerable progress. On inquiring the meaning of Volkmann's phrase of Cousin Alma, she had replied, with a dry jocularly which sounded odd after the tender implications of their long *tête-à-tête* during the

evening, that he should mind his own business. And the conclusion he came to on going finally to bed was that he could not do better than to take her at her word, for his business here was distinctly none other than—Cousin Alma.

CHAPTER VIII

THE succeeding few days at Government House were not distinguished by anything except the gradual settling down of the visitors to the routine of the somewhat long stay they were expected to make. And to doing this neither the Prefect nor his wife showed any disinclination. The friendly relations of the two couples dated back to their schooldays. It was as fellow-gymnasiasts that the two men had first made the acquaintance of their future wives, then inmates of the same pensionnat ; and the makeshifts and troubles, to which they had been put in carrying on their surreptitious correspondence and in arranging assignations, had frequently formed the topic of mirthful reminiscence among them. Naturally since their marriage and their consequent removal to different and distant spheres of action, the bonds of friendship had shown an occasional slackening ; but it had not taken more than the first few hours of the present re-union to rivet them as close as ever, closer, perhaps, owing to an instinctive desire on both sides to make reparation to one another for any seeming disloyalty in the past. Madame de Koratoff had already expressed herself more than once in that sense to the baroness.

"What I am thinking of all the time, Adèle," she was remarking again that morning, "is what adequate compensation I can make you and the Prefect for this additional sign of your disinterested friendship."

"The only compensation you can make us is to say no more about it," replied the baroness, cordially.

"Yes, and to discount my pleasure at your presence heavily by my pangs of conscience for having dragged the two of you—not to mention poor Mr. Volkmann—down to these semi-barbarous parts. You see, I have only my iterated regrets to lessen the grudge I am sure you are harbouring against me."

"You are either fishing for compliments, Maria, or else you are giving me credit for an amount of good nature which I don't possess," smiled the baroness, taking her friend's hand. "I assure you there is a great deal of selfishness in what you insist on calling our self-sacrifice. Just imagine. You are giving us a welcome break in the eternal round of continental spas on which Sergei and I have been wasting our summer holidays for years, taking imaginary cures for imaginary ailments. You have made us exchange the noisy discomfort of expensive hotels for the homely, wholesome quietude of family life."

"It's charming of you to put it like that, Adèle," exclaimed Madame de Koratoff, her face glowing with pleasure.

"Hush ! I am not finished yet in enumerating our list of obligations to you," continued the baroness, brightly. "Sergei and I are finding new ones every day. In your beds we are both sleeping the sleep of the just, instead of, as is usual with us when we are away from home, being martyrs to the tortures of insomnia. And then you insult this beautiful stretch of pure primitive nature by calling it semi-barbarous ! You, I can understand, are probably a little blunted to the joys of the country ; but what do you think it means to me, poor shrivelled town-mouse that I am, to have before my eyes all day long that perspective of green hills, of gracious forest, and that free, strong river as it rushes past us rejoicing in its strength. Why, my dear, I am learning to breathe again."

"And, therefore, you are wickedly wasting your new-found breath in trying to reassure me, you saint of a sinner," laughed Madame de Koratoff. "Very well, then, I shan't make you perjure yourself any more. I will admit, however, that the scenery round here is not at all bad. The only pity is that your husband and his charming secretary can't give us more of their time for the present to explore its manifold beauties. How much longer do you think they will be so busy ?"

"Only another few days, I think. But if you have any grievance against them on that account, you should vent your anger on me. It was my idea that he should clear off his arrears of work here instead of delaying our arrival."

"And a brilliant idea it was, too, Adèle. You deserve a portfolio for it. You have no conception," she continued, in a lower tone, "what a different atmosphere you have brought into this house. De Koratoff is very much brighter. He has his provocations, as you may know, and his customary moroseness is really distressing. But my chief consideration, of course, was Alma."

"Quite so," said the baroness, in a way, however, which gave the impression that she had not entirely made up her mind on the subject.

"To tell you the truth, Adèle, I was getting a little alarmed about the dear child," resumed Madame de Koratoff, "especially during the first few months after I brought her back home from school. She didn't seem able to find herself here at all. Oh no, she didn't complain—she is too dutiful a child for that, but she seemed greatly preoccupied by her memories. Curiously enough, of all the places we had been to, Odessa seemed to have left the strongest impression on her mind, although, as you know, we scarcely spent more than half a day there. Once or twice I was tempted to write to you whether you would not have her stay with you for a little time."

"Well, why didn't you?" asked the baroness.

Had Madame de Koratoff not been so intent on her own thoughts, she would have noticed that the tone of the baroness' question did not contain any very great reproach for the omission.

"I didn't see my way to it, Adèle," was the

reply. "I couldn't let her wander round the world by herself, and it was impossible for me to accompany her. The truth is, I must remain with de Koratoff to—well, because I exercise a beneficial influence over him. And then,—I never broached the subject to him, but, as a matter of fact, I don't think he would have let her go. He adores the girl, and she adores him."

"Perhaps hers is the more beneficial influence," suggested the baroness, dryly.

"Perhaps it is, but really, I am not jealous, my dear," laughed Madame de Koratoff. "The poor things have so little pleasure that they are welcome to all the pleasure they can get out of one another." She looked round cautiously before she proceeded. "But, in any case, my dear, as you may have observed for yourself, it seems to me that the present condition of affairs will not continue to exist much longer. There is Karol. There cannot, of course, be the slightest doubt as to the object of his visit. True, I have not had altogether the very best accounts of his past life—but what will you have? The sooner a young man gets rid of his wild oats, the sooner he will come to his senses. And in every other respect, it is a very suitable match. So as soon as they have settled it between them they can have our blessing."

"Of course, they must settle it between them first," observed the baroness.

"Why, certainly, Adèle. Why make such a point of it?"

"I am not making a point of it, but what I mean is, that you won't insist on Alma doing anything against her own inclination."

"The idea, Adèle! Only why should it be against her inclination? For my own part I haven't the slightest reason to doubt——"

She stopped as the door opened and Alma burst in, a bright flush on her face and a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"Now what are you whispering about, you two conspirators?" she cried gaily.

"We were just discussing whether we should make our shopping expedition to-day or to-morrow," replied her mother.

"Then I decide we go to-day," said Alma, promptly.

"It isn't for you to decide, Miss Impertinence," smiled Madame de Koratoff, "but as your decision happens to coincide with ours, we will allow it to stand."

Alma dropped her a mock curtsy.

"You are really spoiling me, mamma, and I shall complain to papa about it, that is, after we have come back from the shopping. When are we starting?"

"Soon after lunch," replied Madame de Koratoff.

"Then I must at once send down to the ferry to tell the man to give the ferry-boat a good scrubbing," said Alma. "We have to cross the river," she explained to the baroness, "and we always have the carriage to wait for us on the other side. Mamma is too nervous to go across the

bridge in it. I must admit, the shaky old thing rocks fearfully when anything heavier than a feather-weight goes over it. I once made Kuschko drive the two greys across at full gallop. It was awful fun—but oh, didn't I get a scolding when papa found out !”

“And you promised never, never to do it again,” said Madame de Koratoff, quivering with reminiscent alarm.

“Yes, I promised, and I shall perhaps never get another chance of breaking my neck so romantically,” sighed Alma, mock-mournfully. Then her eyes brightened roguishly. “And now that you will allow me to get a word in edgeways, I may as well tell you about another terrible experience I have just had.”

“Oh, Alma !” exclaimed Madame de Koratoff.

“I can always rely on mamma taking me seriously, if no one else does,” laughed Alma, flinging her arms round her mother's neck. “But it really was terrible. I was just passing papa's other private room, forgetting the base purpose to which it is being put at present, and from sheer force of habit I opened the door to peep in, and there, behold, were Uncle Sergei—he said I might call him Uncle Sergei—and—and Mr. Volkmann, glaring at me like two ogres in their den. Gracious, how I ran !”

“And is that all, Alma ?” cried Madame de Koratoff.

“Oh, mamma, is that all, you ask ? Aren't two

ogres in a den enough for you? You are very hard to satisfy."

"Still, I don't see what there was in it to startle you so, Cousin Alma."

It was Karol who had followed her noiselessly into the room.

"Indeed, Cousin Karol—why shouldn't it?" asked Alma, with just a tinge of defiance in her voice.

"Because you ought to be used to this terrible experience by now. You did the same thing yesterday."

"Did I?" asked Alma, turning to him with the most innocent air in the world. "And if I did, how did it come to your knowledge?"

"Oh, quite by accident. I was just entering the corridor and happened to observe it," replied Karol, breaking into a guffaw that sounded a trifle forced.

"Dear me, if you say so I suppose it's true. I do hope it's not becoming chronic with me," said Alma, pretending the utmost anxiety. "Well, the next time you catch me at it, Cousin Karol, you will stop me in time, will you? There's a dear boy."

"No, no, Alma, it's very naughty of you," interposed Madame de Koratoff, in as severe a tone as she could adopt; "you shouldn't interrupt the Prefect and Mr. Volkmann in that way. They have a lot of work to do."

"But, mamma, how do you know that they don't like to be interrupted?" asked Alma, airily.

"You incorrigible girl!" said Madame de Koratoff, flicking at her with her fan.

"Please don't call me that, mamma," pleaded Alma; "I am sure to improve now that I have arranged with Cousin Karol to keep a strict look-out on me."

"Oh, go away, the two of you," laughed Madame de Koratoff.

"Certainly, mamma. And don't forget, the programme for this afternoon is shopping. Oh, while I think of it, perhaps Cousin Karol will take a stroll down to the river and give the ferryman instructions to tidy up his barge. He's such an ugly, cross-tempered wretch—of course, I mean the ferryman, Cousin Karol—that unless he has pressure brought to bear on him, he'll never do the thing properly. Now, I think there's no one like you, Cousin Karol, to mingle stern authority so skilfully with gentle persuasion." And then, when she saw Karol making no move to obey, she added wheedlingly: "I am sure you haven't the heart to risk my pink dress getting soiled, have you?"

"Another pretext," muttered Karol, under his breath.

"What was that you observed?" asked Alma, sweetly.

"That your word is law, Cousin Alma," replied Karol, smiling with contracted lips as he followed her out of the room.

There was little more said between the baroness

and Madame de Koratoff concerning Alma's matrimonial prospects, but the baroness, to whom, for reasons of her own, the subject did not seem finally disposed of, took occasion to bring it up again later on in the morning for discussion with her husband.

"Sergei, I am not sure that we haven't made a mistake in bringing Volkmann with us here," she began.

"I am quite sure we haven't, my dear," replied the Prefect, quickly. "At any rate, it seems to have served its object very well. I had letters this morning from de Gorski and Onogran in which the rascals hint very plainly at their resignation."

"Yes, Sergei, so far so good. But in suggesting that Volkmann should accompany us I forgot little Alma."

The Prefect laughed uproariously.

"That's good, Adèle." He ceased laughing and became serious as he saw the displeased look on his wife's face. "A thousand times pardon, my dear, but, you see, the idea of Volkmann and Alma. . . . Why, the man thinks of nothing but his work."

"But that need not prevent Alma from thinking all the more of him," said the baroness.

"H'm, that never struck me," said the Prefect, gravely.

"She would naturally find him attractive," continued the baroness, pensively. "He is something quite new to her, something quite different from the run of men she has met hitherto. And certainly very different from her cousin Karol."

"Well, she might do worse than Volkmann. He will rise high," said the Prefect, with conviction.

"What are you thinking of, Sergei?" said the baroness, vehemently. "You are perfectly preposterous. How can you contemplate for a moment that de Koratoff, with his inveterate prejudices, will allow anything of the sort when he hears, as he will have to hear, what Volkmann's origin is? You yourself agreed that, in taking him with us, it would be advisable, except under the most extreme provocation, to say nothing on the subject."

"So I did," admitted the Prefect.

"And, besides," went on the baroness, "from what I have noticed myself, and from what Maria told me before, it would appear that—I won't say that they are eager for it, but they would have no objection to her marrying her cousin Karol."

"Then she'll marry him," said the Prefect, with the same conviction as before.

"That's where the trouble comes in, and that's where I feel so very keenly my responsibility in having brought Volkmann," said the baroness, thoughtfully. "His presence here seems to have been instrumental in creating a sort of three-cornered embarrassment between the three young people; and I don't like the idea that one or more of the three may come to grief over it."

"If you don't like the idea, my dear, you have a simple remedy—dismiss it from your mind," said the Prefect, with animation. "Oh, what incorrigible intriguers you women are! When you get too old

to make trouble for yourselves, you straightway proceed to imagine it for others. Now where's the difficulty? Here there are the three stock data—two young men and one girl. There will be the normal complications, and then the thing will straighten itself out in the ordinary everyday way. Remember our own courtship, Adèle. Didn't we only say last night that for a long time it seemed highly probable that you would become Madame de Koratoff and I would marry Maria?"

"There's some comfort in that," smiled the baroness.

"Of course, if the thing is really worrying you, there's an easy way out of it," pondered the Prefect, stroking his moustache.

"And that is?"

"To send Volkmann post haste back to town, only——"

"Only, Sergei?"

"Only in that case I should have to follow him by the next train."

"Then you will not send him back to town," said the baroness, energetically. "After all, my first consideration must be for you. You must get a quiet, undisturbed holiday, and if you are to get that I can see that Volkmann's presence here is indispensable. Besides, you are right, Sergei, it's absurd of me to attempt to play providence to three full-grown, healthy-bodied, healthy-minded young people. They ought to be able to take care of themselves."

"And if you want any further proof, you goose, just look there," whispered the Prefect, with a triumphant nod in the direction of the door, which had just been flung wide to admit Karol and Volkmann, familiarly linked arm in arm, and laughing with genuine gusto at some joke.

"Ha, wouldn't you like to know, my dear Prefect?" asked Karol, stepping up jauntily. "But all right, possess your soul in patience, and you shall hear all about it after lunch. Now, honestly, Volkmann, can one imagine anything funnier?"

"I should think that would depend on one's sense of humour," replied Volkmann, to whom Karol's insinuations in the presence of the baroness were evidently distasteful.

"Well, Prefect, I shall give you an opportunity of judging, but only, now that I think it over, on one condition," said Karol, boisterously.

"Well, don't make it too severe," smiled the Prefect.

"I want you to give your hard-worked secretary a holiday as soon as you can. If you aren't careful he'll go into a decline," he added with ponderous jocularity. "And, besides, I want to teach him shooting. I've taken him thoroughly in hand, I want you to know. Oh, I'll make a man of you yet, Volkmann. You won't recognize yourself when you get back to Odessa."

The baroness looked at Volkmann, and even she was puzzled to decide whether the smile on his face meant polite acquiescence or veiled derision. Then

she looked at the handsome, straight-limbed young dragoon, and made up her mind that he was quite capable of fighting his own battles. And by the time the fish came on the table she had sufficiently forgotten her apprehensions to accept a second helping.

CHAPTER IX

THE ladies had retired to the drawing-room after lunch, and, comfortably bestowed on their lounges, were eating bon-bons. Madame de Koratoff was making a mental comparison between the agreeable coolness of the room and the meridian blaze of the early afternoon sun without. Regretfully she thought of the rashness with which she had pledged herself to the shopping expedition. But she could not disappoint the baroness, who had mentioned that she wished to make a few purchases of things which, even with her careful, provident mind, she had oversighted in the hurry and scurry of packing.

"Well, if you are quite ready, Adèle, we may as well start," said Madame de Koratoff.

The baroness nodded somnolently.

"I am ready, but if it's all the same to you, Maria, I wouldn't first mind half a dozen winks, just to wake me up, you know——"

"Bless you," cried Madame de Koratoff, "bless you for saying that. It's exactly what I want myself. So, Alma, my dear, we will leave ourselves in your hands. If you will call us in half an hour's time—or shall we say three-quarters, Adèle?"

"I think we had better say three-quarters, Maria."

"You had better leave it to my discretion," laughed Alma.

"Very well; but see that you give rather a minute over than under," said Madame de Koratoff. "That will bring us up to about three o'clock, and will give us nice time to get back before it gets dark."

"Very good, mamma. Well, happy dreams. I am going out into the garden."

She watched them settle themselves snugly and made her way out on tip-toes. As she passed the smoking-room she saw, through the half-open door, that its sole occupant was Karol, who sprawled largely in an armchair, fast asleep, a dead cigar on the floor beside him. She stopped, tempted by her spirit of mischief to play some prank on him, but on second thoughts refrained. Karol never took her pleasantries in the right sense. He was always inclined to put an exaggerated construction on them, and she did not think it advisable to encourage him in this habit of exaggeration. The mischievous feeling deserted her suddenly, and she stood looking at him with a tense, scrutinizing gravity that expressed her secret thoughts. Then, with a quick shake of her head, the meaning of which was, no doubt, also perfectly clear to herself, she passed swiftly on.

Halfway along the corridor she suddenly changed her direction and mounted the staircase to

her own room. The lounge had probably disarranged her hair somewhat, and one was never sure whom one might meet in the garden. She was already dressed in outdoor attire—the pink dress had, as usual, evoked from Cousin Karol a string of fulsome compliments ; to which she had replied with a disdainful back, because, contrary to his promise, he had not gone down to the ferry, but had sent a groom instead. She also had to fetch her watch to keep an eye on the flight of time. She gave one peep into the glass, and then another. What a nuisance, her hair looked terribly untidy ; she would have to do it all over again. She never remembered a time when it had given her so much trouble as of late. Down came the long, blonde coils, and no sooner were they down when, with a twinge of chagrin, she remembered that it would take her a quarter of an hour to put them up again. And she only had three-quarters to spare. She stamped her foot with vexation as she realized that it was not only her hair which had given her trouble of late. Her thoughts, her heart, had taken to playing her tricks. Perhaps that was why she had forborne that practical joke on her cousin Karol. It made one look such a fool to feel one's thoughts, one's heart, slipping out of their wonted control and behaving in a wayward, self-contradictory manner. The deft fingers, which had been shaping the straggling strands into order with such furious nimbleness, slowed down to a more leisurely pace. There was no immediate reason for this inordinate

haste. She could take her time about it. But when she finally looked at her watch again, she did not know whether to feel glad or sorry—it was a brilliant instance of the unreliability of her moods—to find that she had accomplished her task in ten minutes instead of the expected fifteen.

As if to set herself right in her own eyes, she spent the remaining five in choosing a book to take with her for reading. She had a good half-hour yet on her hands. With measured step—she was still reminding herself that there was no visible cause for haste—she walked down the staircase and out into the garden, spacious enough to be called a park. She came to the first bench, but she did not sit down. She came to the second, but she still did not seat herself, although she knew that the next one was some little distance off. Here was more evidence of the contrariety of her humour. She had brought the book with her to read—but why should she read just because she happened to have a book with her? Why not, if she choose, regard it as a sort of companion, a chaperon, if one liked that better? And so she wandered on, crossing and retracing her steps, with a queer sense of futility gaining on her as the minutes slipped by. She had traversed the park from end to end, and now was passing the side-walk where it branched off into the avenue of poplars leading to the summer-house beyond. It was a long time since she had seen the summer-house. She would just look into it and turn back.

As she swung back the door of ivy-grown

lattice-work she saw Volkmann rising from a seat and regarding her with an irresolute look.

"I—beg your pardon—I'm intruding, I believe," she stammered.

"Not at all, it's I who am the intruder," he replied. "I wandered down as far as this and, seeing no one in possession of this charming spot, thought that I would borrow it for a little while."

"I thought you were with the Prefect," she said, blushing, despite herself, at the words.

"Heavens, Mademoiselle de Koratoff, have a little mercy on the Prefect," he exclaimed in mock horror.

"And incidentally on you, Mr. Volkmann. Very well, I leave you to yourself."

"Pardon me, mademoiselle, you will do no such thing. I am the usurper. I resign in favour of the rightful owner."

"I can see we are going to quarrel again," she laughed, "and this time out of our very superabundance of good feeling and politeness towards one another. This summer-house has been known to hold eight."

"I take your hint," he said quickly, and with a curious air of purposefulness which did not escape her. "Let me wait, however, at least till I have seen you ensconced in your favourite seat."

She sat down without another word, and he followed suit. She had placed the closed book on the seat next to her. He glanced at it.

"What are you reading, if I may ask?" he said.

"Maupassant," she replied readily. "I am trying to keep up the little French they drilled into me at the convent. I should hate to think that papa's money was all wasted."

"I hope your father appreciates your thrift," said Volkmann.

She sat silent, her gaze on the ground and her brows wrinkled in thought. He asked no question, waiting for her to speak. She did so at last.

"I was thinking," she explained, looking at him frankly, "of what you said just now about my father."

"Did you? It hardly seems to call for consideration," he said coldly.

"Well, not so much what you said, Mr. Volkmann, but the way in which you said it. It is, of course, only my stupid fancy, but—was there not just the faintest suspicion of a covert sneer in your words?"

"I—I don't know what should make you think so," he said, patently taken aback.

"Well, you heard me admit that it was probably nothing but my imagination, and yet——"

"And yet?"

She took up the book, and handled it as though to find relief from her distress in the thing which had caused it.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Volkmann," she said, with an appealing look at him, "I would sooner not say any more."

"But you must—I insist. You have made a

charge, and you must give your reasons—or withdraw,” he said hotly.

His vehemence roused her into self-possession.

“Very well, Mr. Volkmann, I shall not withdraw. Your remark seemed to bear out my impression that you don’t like my father. On more than one occasion I have surprised you looking at him in a way that seemed to indicate positive hatred. It gave me the idea—it could naturally be only an idea, because I have never seen such a thing—it gave me the idea, I say, of a tiger waiting to spring on his prey. It was so different from your usual air.”

“Mademoiselle de Koratoff!” he exclaimed, starting up, unable to contain his perturbation.

She broke into a peal of merry laughter.

“And now that you have made me appear sufficiently absurd, I suggest that we change the subject.”

“Not yet,” he said brusquely. “Seeing that you have been good enough to confide to me your impression of my attitude to your father,” he went on, spacing his words deliberately, “would you mind doing the same with regard to my attitude towards yourself?”

“Yes, yes, Mr. Volkmann; you are right not to let me off so easily. I fully deserve your satire,” she said, still laughing to break the tension she had created. “After this, I suppose, you will ask me my opinion of your attitude towards all the remaining members of the household, from my mother

down to the scullery-maid and the Persian cat. Hadn't I better make you out an inventory?"

"I keep to my question," he persisted.

"I ought not to encourage your obstinacy," she replied lightly; "but I will take your question in the spirit in which I am sure you ask it—as a joke, that is. Your attitude towards me I take to be something like this: if you are biding your time to devour my poor papa at a mouthful, you are keeping friends with me as a concession to good manners—and because you haven't quite made up your mind in how many mouthfuls you are going to swallow me."

"Thank you. I am much obliged." There was a brazen ring in the words; but he could not support the half-smiling gaze with which she regarded him. "Now we can talk of something else."

"Excuse me, it's my turn to object now, Mr. Volkmann," she cried gaily. "We may as well go through with it to the bitter end, because it is extremely probable that we shall never refer to the subject again." She suddenly turned very grave. "It is really only a side-issue, but it is due to you that I should mention it."

He did not ask her what she meant, but waited for her to proceed of her own accord. His curiosity was great, but his newly acquired sense of caution was greater.

"You see, Mr. Volkmann," she said awkwardly, "you are our guest; and therefore it is our duty to make your stay with us as agreeable as possible.

Whatever our social shortcomings, we ought, at any rate, to try and make our company congenial to you. Now, so far as my father is concerned, I am afraid—you see, I am quite frank—I cannot answer for him. As a rule, it takes people some time to get used to him, and very often they haven't the patience to wait. But, at least, I ought to make an effort to remove any false prejudice you may have against me."

"I assure you, Mademoiselle de Koratoff——" he began, carried away by his astonishment.

"I should prefer to have your assurance after you have heard me," she interrupted, smiling at him tremulously. "Well, Mr. Volkmann, I know that I commenced by giving you a worse opinion of me than I need have done—no, don't contradict, because I am sure of it. I went almost out of my way to do it. Do you remember the cure you suggested for my *ennui*? My answer to that must have appeared to you callous, hard-hearted—unwomanly, perhaps. I want to tell you—I have been wanting to tell you ever since—that that answer of mine was foolish bravado, because I—well, I thought you had no right to lecture me at that early stage in our acquaintance."

"It was unpardonable of me," he exclaimed.

"But not so unpardonable as my reply, Mr. Volkmann. What I want to say now is that I do feel for the hungry, the sick, the lowly. There are certain things that happen here within my cognizance, but which I am no more able to interfere with than

with, say, the planetary system. I cannot administer any actual moral or physical relief because, owing to circumstances, I can do so very little, and that little would be received with suspicion by those whom I wished to help. But the will is there, and the sympathy. One day last winter I accidentally came across a little procession that was bringing into the town two poor old people who had died of cold in the forest. I shut myself up in my room, and cried all the afternoon. I beg your pardon, did you say anything?"

"No," he replied shortly.

"I thought you were in pain, and your eyes had just that—that tiger-look with which you occasionally favour papa," she continued, with an almost imperceptible movement of shrinking.

"It isn't pleasant to hear of old people dying of cold, is it?"

"Scarcely more pleasant than to go through the experience one's self," she replied brightly, as though set at ease by his explanation. She pulled out her watch, and rose sharply, with a cry of dismay. "Oh dear! I'm nearly late. I must run to wake mamma, or else this much-planned shopping expedition of ours will not come off to-day."

Despite, however, her alleged need of haste, she was rather leisurely in her departure. She dallied a moment or two with her book, adjusted a bangle, pushed back an obtrusive creeper. One would have thought she was waiting for something. Was it for the assurance she had asked him to defer to later

on? But Volkmann gave no sign. He stood holding the trellis-door open for her.

"You are lucky to get rid of me so easily," she smiled as she passed by him. "If I had stayed I should have bored you to death with my self-analysis. No, don't answer; I know perfectly well what etiquette requires you to say to that."

He found himself still holding the door open while she had already reached the other end of the poplar avenue where the bend took her out of sight. With a cheery "Au revoir" and wave of her hand, to which he had no recollection of responding, she had made off at a run, as though to prove to him that her lateness was no vain pretext. With a dry, mirthless laugh he prepared to follow her back to the house. He must go and see whether the Prefect was ready for him.

He walked at a saunter, to give himself time to fix the details of this curious talk in his mind. There were several morals to be derived from it. The chief of these was, undoubtedly, that he must have been egregiously lacking in caution and circumspectness. The pressure of work he had shared with the Prefect, the larger portion falling to himself, had left him comparatively little time to mingle with the de Koratoff family circle. And yet these few occasions had been enough to give at least one of them scope for observing something of the real feeling with which he regarded them. He had, unconsciously to himself, been showing his heart in his face. The second point of importance was—what

was he to think of this girl who had made the discovery? Had she made it by the woman's wit, or the child's intuition aided by the fool's blundering haphazardness? Till that afternoon she had given him the idea of being a curious blending of these three attributes. But he felt that henceforth, to prevent himself from going on a false track, he would have to readjust his focus of her character. He must study safety. Seeing the great part she was to play in the scheme of his revenge, he could not afford to ignore any of the hidden elements of her nature which she happened to display to him.

There was, for instance, the deeper note she had struck in her talk, a deeper note than he had thought her capable of striking. He was only just beginning to gauge the full measure of his surprise at what she had said. At the time his one thought had been how false and incongruous it all sounded on her lips. It had struck him as a pose, a would-be interesting pose, for apart from the coquettish desire to please, what motive had she for wishing to stand well in his eyes? The pretext of making his stay more enjoyable had seemed ludicrously hollow. But now a change was coming over his aspect of her new phase. She was wafting back on him an after-trail, an aroma, he might call it, of sincerity which made the vitiated atmosphere he breathed more bearable. He acquitted her of hypocritical emotionalism; he was willing to concede to her potentialities of goodness.

Why should he not? It was all to his advantage.

It made his task easier for him. The nature of his scheme rendered it essential that he should foster her society. He would have to see much of her, as much as possible. So was it not better that he should find in her extenuating points, points to lessen the feeling of distaste with which she had filled him, not for herself, as he had already once admitted, but as being near and dear to the man whose stony heart he meant to crush under the relentless heel of his hatred. And oh, the irony of it—she had wept for his parents! His parents had gone down to their grave pitied and mourned for by the daughter of their assassin! He would, when the time came, remember that to her credit. He would show her as a reward for it all the mercy he could spare, provided—he clenched his hands to harden his resolve—provided it meant no discount on the full measure of his retribution. That was fixed and unalterable. Yes, true, his plan showed dark and cruel in the gracious sunshine, of which her blonde brightness made her suddenly seem to him emblematic. He wished she had a sister to whom all de Koratoff's heart went out instead. But she had no substitute who might save her from her fate. And yet, how strange—she had wept for his parents!

CHAPTER X

HE had come to the open strip of lawn between the garden proper and the house when he saw the shopping party descend the verandah staircase. Karol followed slouching behind, indolent and morose, his hands deep in his pockets. Smiling and lifting his hat, Volkmann was about to pass them when Madame de Koratoff called him.

"It's useless for you to go in just yet, Mr. Volkmann—the Prefect is still in the middle of his siesta the baroness tells me. You will have ample time to give us the pleasure of your escort down to the ferry."

There was nothing left to Volkmann save to comply. He felt a certain reluctance to show himself before Nyman, whom he had not seen since the night of his arrival, in this company. He had, of course, no doubt about Nyman's discretion, but he shrank from giving him occasion to draw comparisons between his own and his friend's unequal positions. For Volkmann had sufficient proof that, in spite of the merciless discipline he had given to his soul, Nyman's humanity still vibrated to every delicate touch. With a secret sigh Volkmann fell into line with them. At all events—he tried to

draw some consolation from the fact—here was an opportunity of continuing his talk with Alma. But even that was not to be.

“Mr. Volkmann, will you have compassion on two old women—we are really not so very old, are we, Maria?—and give us each one of your strong, young arms?” said the baroness.

Her quick eye had noted that Volkmann was about to attach himself to Alma, but that did not suit her purpose. Though her fears had been allayed, she still felt it her duty to do all in her power to save her friends from any interference with their wishes that might result from her introduction of Volkmann—she intended it as no act of unfriendliness to Volkmann himself. And however able Karol might be to fight his own battles himself, a little occasional help could not come amiss to him. She had the satisfaction of seeing her manoeuvre turn out successfully, for Karol and Alma paired off behind.

Karol's face, which had brightened at the beginning, gradually resumed its sullenness.

“Well, bear, aren't you going to say something?” Alma addressed him, after a considerable pause.

“No, because I am still waiting for you to say something to me,” was his gruff reply.

“Why, what are you waiting for me to say?” she asked.

“To invite me to accompany you to the shops.”

“Well, but mamma did that, and you told her you weren't quite sure if you cared to come.”

"No, quite so—because you hadn't asked me."

"But, Karol, this is perfectly absurd of you," she exclaimed impatiently. "Fancy your standing on ceremony like that with us."

"You know it isn't ceremony."

"Then you had better not say what it is. And beside," she added impulsively, "if you wish to know the truth——"

"Yes, I should very much indeed like to know the truth," he snarled.

"I never had any intention of inviting you to come."

He turned to her, an exclamation of fierce anger on his lips ; but she calmly lifted her hand to hush him down.

"Now, please, don't get tragic about it, whatever you do, my dear boy. You know, or ought to know by now, that shopping is one of the most sacred functions of a woman's life. You may not think it, but I feel as serious at present as when I went in my long dress of bridal white and the *rosière* on my head to the confirmation service—I shudder to think how many years ago. It's absurd to take a man when you go shopping. The mere knowledge of him, standing there at your elbow, chafing with impatience and cursing quietly under his breath, is absolutely fatal to making a bargain."

"Very clever, Cousin Alma," he sneered, "but you have been getting altogether very clever of late."

"Oh? When, for instance, did you notice that?"

"This morning, when you sent me down to the ferry—to get me out of your way."

The flush which the hot sun had painted on her cheeks deepened a little as she turned her head disdainfully, the only answer she vouchsafed to him.

"You see, you admit that I'm right," he continued, putting no check on his vehemence. "I can also tell you the real reason why you object to my company this afternoon."

"Well, why?"

The question escaped her unawares.

"Because Volkmann has to stay at home."

She looked at him with wide-open eyes of surprise.

"If he had been able to come you would, of course, have had to ask me too. You couldn't very well have left me out without attracting comment."

Her sole reply was to hasten her step, but he caught her by the arm and forced her to keep back.

"Oh, you can't run away from what I have got to say to you. I have quite made up my mind to say it this time. You have been a bit clumsy, Cousin Alma. You should have taken a little more pains to keep your interest in Mr. Volkmann under cover. Where is your pride to treat a fellow like that on terms of equality? The Prefect's secretary! It sounds big, but don't we know what it means? A glorified clerk! I don't know since when every jackanapes of a quill-driver has the right to call himself a gentleman. But he's evidently gentleman

enough for my Cousin Alma. Why, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

She had made no attempt to release herself, and only when he ceased speaking she turned on him and asked calmly—

"Have you quite finished, Cousin Karol?"

"Yes, if you promise——"

"Then I forbid you to speak another word to me."

He looked at her in sheepish stupefaction.

"Not another word, do you hear? No, I had better not say that," she corrected herself musingly. "It would only give rise to talk, and then I should have to expose your foolishness. But the next time you go out of your way to annoy me, I shall simply tell mamma to ask you to cut your visit short."

He gasped once or twice before he recovered his voice.

"Oh, please, don't be so cruel to me, Cousin Alma," he whimpered. "I didn't mean to annoy you—upon my honour I didn't. Do you think it gives me pleasure to speak to you unkindly? You know, dear Cousin Alma, I would sooner die than cause you the least little pain."

"Well, I hope you will keep that in mind for the future," she said dryly.

"Yes, yes, upon my honour, I will," he assured her; "only I couldn't help letting my feelings run away with me just now. The first day or two after I came it was Cousin Karol here and Cousin Karol there and Cousin Karol everywhere. You didn't

even object to my kissing you every now and again. And now you simply won't let me get within arm's length of you, and all the time I love you better than anything on earth, upon my honour, I do."

"I don't like you an atom less than I did the first day you came," she replied soberly. "And I haven't forgotten that you were very nice to me when I stayed with you."

"I was—wasn't I?" he exclaimed with eager *naïveté*.

"But you spoilt all that by what you said just now. You have been very naughty, and before I can make friends with you again, you must agree to one or two conditions."

"Oh, I'll agree to anything, Cousin Alma."

"Very good. Then, in the first place, you must never"—there was just the faintest trace of hesitation in her words—"say spiteful and unwarranted things about Mr. Volkmann any more. After all, he is our guest, and we must do all we can to be pleasant to him."

"Oh yes, and he quite deserves it too; he's really a very decent chap," Karol informed her, with ludicrous inconsistency.

"And secondly, Karol," she proceeded, as though she had not heard his interjection, "you must make up your mind and be sensible, and never talk to me about love and nonsense of that sort. You will, won't you, Cousin Karol?"

He fell back a pace or two.

"Not talk to you about love, Cousin Alma? But I thought——"

"Now that's exactly what you must not do; you mustn't think, or you'll get cross again. And, please, do take that scowl off your face, or the other people will fancy that we've had a scene, which would be perfectly untrue—now wouldn't it, Cousin Karol? Oh, look, and there's the ferry."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, like a fish gasping for breath, too utterly bewildered by the sudden turns of her mood to find articulation. But though he was too dumfounded to talk, he found himself unable to refrain from doing the very thing she had forbidden him—to think. She was quite wrong in saying that thinking would make him cross. On the contrary, the more he thought, the rosier grew the colour of his humour. It grew rosier still, the more his thoughts crystallized themselves into a definite conclusion. And by the time he joined the others by the riverside, he had worked himself up into a positive state of boisterous bonhomie. But he scanned Volkmann with a sideways furtiveness, as if the latter were appearing to him in an entirely new role.

Sullenly obsequious Nyman stood leaning on his pole in the middle of the barge which he had rammed up close to the bank to make the embarkation easier for his august passengers. Volkmann could not even tell whether he had noticed his presence, for Nyman had fixed his gaze, stealthy and expectant, it seemed, steadily towards the dense

willow thicket on the right. Whom was he expecting? Volkmann followed his glance, with a vague presentiment which was realized when he saw the rushes part and Malka step forth. She made her way straight up to Madame de Koratoff.

"Oh, your ladyship," she addressed her, a picture of trembling humility.

Madame de Koratoff sharply drew her skirts away.

"Go away, girl. You can't come across with us—you must wait till the ferry-boat returns."

"I have no desire to go across, madame. Will your ladyship allow me a few words?"

"Then be quick. We have no time."

"I am a seamstress, your ladyship, and I would ask your ladyship if she has any work for me."

"You are very impertinent," cried Madame de Koratoff, angrily. "What do you mean by way-laying me like this?"

Malka's head bent lower, and she clasped her hands.

"I have tried to see your ladyship at your ladyship's house, but the servants would not admit me, and I have no money to spare on bribes for them."

"A very plain-spoken young person this, isn't she?" said Madame de Koratoff to the baroness. "What have you there?" she continued, turning to Malka with a little more interest and pointing to the small parcel the girl carried with her.

"A few specimens of my work. Will your ladyship kindly deign to cast a glance at them?"

And without waiting for a reply she deftly laid bare the contents.

"Oh, what a nuisance you are, to be sure," said Madame de Koratoff, shrugging her shoulders. "Let me look—are they clean?"

"Oh, quite clean, your ladyship."

Alma had stepped up curiously to join her mother in the inspection. With critical eye she ran over the three pieces of cambric Malka held out to them.

"And you say this is your work?" Alma asked presently.

"My very own, your ladyship."

"But it's very, very clever," said Alma, warmly. "Look, mamma, have you ever seen such a hem-stitch? And the coarse material the poor thing has had to work on. That makes it more wonderful still. Why, the girl's an artist."

"What do you think, Adèle?" Madame de Koratoff asked of the baroness.

"I quite agree with Alma."

"Very well, then, my good girl," said Madame de Koratoff quite graciously to Malka. "You may call at the house to-morrow morning. I shall give instructions that you are to be admitted. Then we shall arrange."

"A thousand thanks, your ladyship."

"And now, Adèle, we are really going to start, much as you may have got to doubt the fact," laughed Madame de Koratoff. "And so, Karol, you are going back with Mr. Volkmann, are you?"

"Yes ; I should only be a nuisance to you," replied Karol, lightly.

And then, with laughing farewells and much waving of hats by the men and of handkerchiefs by the ladies, the ferry-boat set off. Volkmann carried away with him an aching impression of Nyman figuring in the gay scene with a stony, sphinx-like aloofness, as though it were presumptuous of him to betray an interest in the doings of these great folk. Perhaps he was chuckling to himself even now at the huge fraud he had perpetrated on them in the person of his friend Baruch, who was no whit better than he, who had starved and cobbled his own boots as often as he, and who yet was permitted by them to breathe the same rare atmosphere that filled their own aristocratic lungs. Yes, thought Volkmann, and he prayed it might be so, perhaps Nyman, the helot, was finding amusement in Baruch, the patrician.

He turned round and saw Karol ferreting busily among the willow thicket.

"Have you seen her, Volkmann ?" cried Karol.

"Seen whom ?" asked Volkmann, absently.

"That stunning Jew-girl who was here just now. What the deuce has become of her ? Run away, frightened, I suppose, the silly thing. Lucifer, did you ever see such flashing eyes ?"

"I didn't notice," said Volkmann, curtly.

"That's a pity," laughed Karol, "because half the time she was flashing them at you. And with such a queer look in them. I could have sworn she knew you."

Volkmann made an off-hand reply. He could not conceal from himself that he felt vaguely disconcerted. Malka's appearance at the ferry was certainly no accident. It was obvious that her presence was the result of information she had received from Nyman, and that she had some object in her coming. On that point he was not decided. Perhaps her request for employment was genuine; perhaps it was only a pretext to gain admission to the house where she knew he was staying. He sincerely hoped it was anything but that. His task was difficult enough without his being handicapped by possible complications arising from Malka's espionage. Was it an omen to warn him of developments in his plan of revenge of which so far he had not taken count?

"You don't look happy, my dear Volkmann," Karol interrupted him sympathetically. "And I'm not surprised, with the sweet solace of blue-books and governmental reports awaiting you when you get back to the house."

"Yes, it's not ideal weather for work," Volkmann agreed wearily.

"Well, man, you're not a slave, are you? Take French leave, and explain afterwards. I'll help you to make it right with the Prefect. We'll get the guns, and I'll give you your first lesson in shooting. You have no idea how cool and pleasant it is in the coverts."

Volkmann, of course, declined the invitation, although the prospect certainly tempted him. He

knew he needed distraction. He was getting to feel very stale, and required a fresh interest of some sort to quicken him. He must not allow his revenge to become his one obsession, or he would end by shouting it aloud from the house-tops.

He was genuinely pleased when he found that the Prefect came to meet his wishes half way. Volkman came upon him playing dominoes with de Koratoff.

"I am getting beaten, Volkmann," he cried, in mock despair, "beaten shamefully and disgracefully. I dare not leave off till I have re-established my honour. So away with you, you two young rascals, and don't stand here revelling in my downfall. We've done with work for to-day, Volkmann."

"Very good, your Excellency. I wish you better luck," laughed Volkmann, backing out of the room.

"That's all right now," said Karol, joining him an instant later. "You are coming along with me. There's nothing to prevent our getting a little sport at last." And, without giving Volkmann time to reply, he went on: "Just go and get your top-boots on, because the ground's a bit marshy in places. Meantime I'll run down to the arsenal and pick a couple of guns for us."

Five minutes later they had rejoined each other, and without further delay set out for the coverts. On the way Karol explained to his companion, with a great show of technical detail, which no doubt was intended to sound very learned, the mechanism and proper mode of handling the weapon, and

commented condescendingly on the quick grasp and intelligence of his pupil. A quarter of an hour's walk brought them to the outskirts of the forest, the same forest, thought Volkmann, which now so serene and smiling, had last winter closed its grim, pitiless tentacles round those who had trustfully sought its protection. For some time the open spacing of the trees allowed the two to walk abreast, and then, as the undergrowth became denser, Karol took the lead. Volkmann almost laughed aloud at his theatrical air of mystery and importance that exaggerated their simple quest into the march of a mighty army through labyrinths of primeval timber growths. He knew well enough by now that Karol was capable of taking nothing seriously, not even his amusements, and the tense excitement, which seemed to grow on him momentarily, filled Volkmann with a sense of charlatan grotesqueness.

So they crept on without a word, Volkmann humouring Karol's injunction for strictest silence. Suddenly Karol uttered a suppressed cry and turned about sharply, pointing his piece into the branches of one of the trees behind. Volkmann had also faced about, eagerly looking for the object which had drawn Karol's attention. The next instant there was a loud report, and Volkmann gave a sudden spring at the hot, blistering sensation that raked along the back of his head. He turned, and found Karol looking at him, his face very white, but a smile of truculent unconcern flitting about the corners of his lips.

"Hulloa, not hurt, are you, old chap?" he asked, glancing in a puzzled way from the barrel of his gun to Volkmann's drawn features, and from there to the tree which had been his professed target, and then back again to his gun.

Volkmann was probing the tingling spot delicately with his fingers, which presently he drew away covered with blood.

"Oh, it's nothing much," he said carelessly. "Only a scalp scratch, I expect. Oh, what was it you were shooting at, by the way?"

"Lord, man, what a fright you gave me," laughed Karol, with every appearance of full composure. "From the way you jumped, I thought I had shivered your skull to atoms. Oh, what was I shooting at? Did you notice that squirrel in the tree there? Well, probably you didn't. One doesn't notice these little things till one's eye has had a bit of training. The little beggar didn't stir as we were passing close under him, and grinned at me so impudently that it was my duty to teach him a lesson. But something happened just as I fired—a twig dropped on my hand, I think, and threw me off my aim. Still, all's well that ends well, eh, Volkmann?"

"Oh, I suppose so," replied Volkmann, dabbing at the wound with his handkerchief. "Just a moment, though. Did you think we were going out to shoot buffaloes?"

"Why, what makes you say that?" asked Karol, taken aback.

"Because you have brought with you an eight-bore rifle, and were using cartridge."

Karol laughed loud but awkwardly.

"Why, so I did. I hardly noticed it, upon my honour. I suppose in the hurry I helped myself to what was most handy. But I'll never believe you again, you wicked impostor. You've taken me in finely. You pretend to know nothing about fire-arms, and here you go talking about them like a professor at the military polytechnic."

"I've studied them—at the museums," said Volkmann, dryly.

"H'm, a most unfortunate beginning, though," continued Karol, scanning Volkmann's face sideways. "I'm blest if I can understand it yet. They say mine's the steadiest arm in the regiment. However, the great thing is that there's no harm done. We can almost treat it as a joke, can't we, Volkmann?"

"Oh, I'm quite willing to do that," said Volkmann, pressing his lips tight.

"Or, better still, perhaps, say nothing about it, eh? We can account for it, say, by a trip-up—a bit of jagged stone would be just the thing to make a scratch like that. You see, I want the Governor and the Prefect to come out with me one of these days, just to show them what I can do, and if my fidgety aunt hears that—that I've been a little careless, she might object to their going. And that would be a tremendous disappointment for me."

"Oh, quite so, quite so," said Volkmann. "I

think I shall turn back now. You need not come, if you would rather go on."

"But, my dear fellow," said Karol, reproachfully, "do you think I would let you go back alone? If you were to faint, or anything else were to happen to you on the road, I should never forgive myself."

They looked in on their way home at the apothecary's, who applied a plaster to the wound and promised complete healing in two or three days.

"But an eighth of an inch deeper would have made all the difference," he whispered significantly.

Volkmann was extremely pleased that his injury was of a nature to lend itself so easily to the concealment of its cause, and he accepted Karol's suggestion of the jagged flint as being as good as any other. The cap, with the tell-tale bullet-hole in it, was easily disposed of. The alarm of the baroness and Madame de Koratoff, on their return, and their anxiety were positively touching, and Volkmann had hard work in declining Madame de Koratoff's repeated offer for the telegraphic summoning of the garrison doctor from across. Alma said nothing, but she looked thoughtfully from Volkmann to Karol, who had taken it upon himself, as an eyewitness, to give an account of the accident. But the high spirits she had brought back with her had given out, and, pleading the fatigues of the day, she retired early to her room.

Karol, too, would have been pleased had he

known that he had risen greatly in Volkmann's estimation. Volkmann admired him as a man who knew what he wanted, and lost no time in getting it. Imaginary motives, flimsy pretexts, puerile explanations, and yet what a perfect man of action ! He did not sit down and wait for the complications to multiply. Volkmann had already saddled himself with two — the first was Malka, the second was Karol himself. Would there be any more ? As yet he was blissfully unconscious that the third, and greatest of them all, was still to come.

CHAPTER XI

It was nearly a fortnight later, and in the balmy evening breeze, Nyman sat on his habitual tree-stump, waiting for some chance belated fare who might have business to take him across. In fact, he as a rule spent well-nigh half the summer night out in the open, preferring it to the choking dankness and darkness of the hut that had been set aside for him as his official abode. He had cut himself a flute from one of the bulrushes, and the slow, even-toned music it made gave no token of the hot lips or the fevered heart of the musician. He was soloist to a spontaneous orchestra with which nature provided him—the soft lapping of the waves, the monotonously regular swishing of the willow bushes, the castanet rattle of croaking frogs. But Nyman heard nothing of all these. He played to the accompaniment of a long-drawn undertone that was never silent within him, waking or sleeping, by day or by night.

So it was his custom to play through the whole evening, letting his impromptu fancy wander through the gamut of his instrument and weaving it into endless melodies, not without some theme and method in the seemingly irresponsible tangle

of his variations. It was a pastime to which he had taken since the day of Baruch's return. The shallow optimism and the still more artificial pessimism of the Roman hedonist, who had been his favourite reading, had ceased to strike a responsive chord in his heart, had begun to sicken him. And then, by a happy inspiration, he had hit upon this undreamt-of resource of his own. There was a deep consolation for him in the sight of that infinite forest of bulrushes on which he might vent the inexhaustible stream of music from his heart. Each evening he fashioned himself a new flute, breaking it in pieces at the end with a riotous sense of luxurious extravagance. Oh, it felt so good to be extravagant in something, to burst through, if only for an instant, the iron boundary of self-imposed restraint. And gradually there attached itself to this habit of breaking up his flute a superstitious hope. Perhaps each fresh reed might have a more subtle virtue, more magic than its predecessor, might have more strength to draw near to him, by some unconscious spell it contained, the great and distant desire for which his soul was for ever stretching out its impotent hands.

To-night he had fashioned his flute with more special care, if that were possible. To-night he breathed into it a more abandoned pain. To-night, therefore, it came to him almost without surprise that his immeasurable longing should find its consummation and be achieved. He looked round, with scarcely a quiver or a start, as he heard a light

footfall coming up from behind. Yes, if she had not come to-night, then she would have never, never come.

"Good evening, Nyman," said Malka, her breath short and quick. It seemed she had been running.

He merely nodded in reply to her, his flute still to his lips, but making no sound. He knew he could not yet trust himself to speak.

She stood a little nearer to him and continued—

"I have come to you with a message from Baruch."

He still only looked his inquiry, angry with himself for the sinking at his heart. Why trick himself constantly into this self-delusion? Did he not know from the start that she could not have come to him of her own accord?

"He wants me to bring to you his apologies for not having come to see you himself. He could not find the time. He asked me to tell you that the work is in hand, and that he is applying himself to it with every fibre of his strength. But so far he cannot say anything how it will turn out."

"Is that all he said?" asked Nyman.

"Yes, that's all he said," she replied with a deep sigh, staring before her vacantly. "And, would you believe it—those are the only words he has spoken to me all the time we have been together in the house," she added, dropping her voice to a weary whisper.

"Then you don't see much of him, do you?"

"How can I?" she counter-questioned fiercely. "All day long I am shut up in the room, stitching, stitching, stitching. The young lady spends a great deal of her time with me. She is very kind. Every now and then I meet him about the house, only he is always in a great hurry, and there are always people near by, and so, of course, I dare not speak to him. But this afternoon, when I happened to be alone, he slipped into the workroom and whispered the message, and made off again before I could even answer him."

Nyman was silent. He tried, with a vehement effort, to understand the psychology of a man who had a chance of speaking to Malka and did not give himself time to wait for her answer.

She had lapsed back into her previous mood of vacancy, from which she presently roused herself.

"Oh, by the way, I haven't thanked you yet," she said.

"No need," he said curtly. "There was no trouble in doing what you asked me."

She shrugged her shoulders with evident indifference to his opinion. But when had she ever cared for his opinions?

"Still, it was good of you to send me word. But for that I might never have had the chance of speaking to them. Oh, didn't I think it all out cleverly?" she went on, with a great air of craftiness. "I said to myself, now that they have visitors, they are sure to go across some time or other. They will let you know to be ready, you will send for me,

and here I shall be waiting for them. And that's how it turned out."

"Yes, that's how it turned out," Nyman echoed absently.

"Oh, not that they are sorry," she said quickly. "They say my work is very good. All day long they are singing my praises. From to-night I am to sleep in the house, so that I need not waste any time in passing to and from my lodgings. Oh, I shall earn a great deal of money."

"Well, and what will you do with it when you've got it?" he asked, half smiling at her pleased eagerness.

"Follow Baruch when he goes away again from here," she cried, her eyes flashing joyously in the semi-darkness.

He drew back from her, and, putting the flute to his lips, sounded a few shrilly disconsolate notes.

"Yes, whether he cares for it or not, I shall follow him—follow him to the end of the world, if need be. Oh, I am not going to let him out of my sight again. Tell me, Nyman," she continued, her manner more tense and concentrated than it had yet been, "what is this work he speaks about?"

"I don't know," he answered sullenly.

"You don't know, when it's all your doing?" she said contemptuously.

"My doing?"

"Perhaps you will deny it. I saw it all; I watched the two of you that night he stood here. You told him of something that set him all ablaze

with fury. You tried to make him do some desperate thing—probably because you did not have the courage to do it yourself. But, don't you think it, my friend, he will not do it. I warned him that no good would come of listening to you. And now you may as well tell me what the meaning of it all is."

"I can't tell you the meaning of it, Malka," said Nyman, slowly.

"You know, but you can't tell. Very well. Then you shall never tell me anything again. You shall never have the chance. You know I mean what I say, Nyman."

A strangled cry broke from him at the threat. Yes, he knew that she meant what she said. But, Baruch or no Baruch, he could not let himself drown without a struggle in the waters of despair. And, each word quivering with angry shame for himself, he told her.

She listened with a puzzled air, and at last shook her head in open perplexity.

"Some plan of vengeance for the death of his parents? What plan is it?"

"That I don't know, Malka, upon my soul I don't know," he said passionately, her threat still ringing in his ears. "He would not tell me. I should know in good time, he said."

She shook her head more vigorously still.

"I believe you, Nyman, I believe you this time. But what can he be about? I have watched him as well as I could, but I have noticed nothing. He is

very friendly to all of them. He goes about with an open face and a light heart, as if he hadn't a care in the world. No, you are mistaken, I tell you. He means nothing, he plans nothing. He does not care about his parents, he does not care about any one. His thoughts are all for himself."

And her voice, which had risen gradually in pitch, broke off with a shrill scream.

Nyman had raised himself with a movement that suggested shrinking and eagerness in a curious composite way.

"Perhaps you are right, Malka," he said hoarsely, "perhaps he does not care for any one but himself. And, therefore, why should any one care for him?"

But she had evidently not heard.

"Malka," he said, timidly touching her on the arm.

"Yes?" she asked sharply.

"I only want to ask you a simple question."

She turned to him suspiciously.

"Suppose," he said, taking her silence for permission, "suppose I were not what I am now, what I have become here—suppose I had returned to you having achieved something out there in the world, with something worthy of you to offer for your having—say, for instance, I had come back a doctor, a gentleman—would it have made any difference?"

"Not if you had come back a king, Nyman!"

He heaved a scarcely audible sigh.

"Thank you. That's all I wanted to know,

Malka. It will do me good to know it. I have often wondered to what it was all due—to my evil fortune or to myself. I'm glad it's myself. A man may do nothing against his fortune, but he may do a great deal against himself."

"I don't understand you—you are raving," she said coldly.

"No, that I am not, Malka. Just let me show you how sane I am. I refused your gratitude just now, didn't I? Well, that was because I desired that there should be one thing at least in which, mean and humble as I am, all the giving should be on my side and all the taking on the other. It makes a man of me to think that I still can do favours. The knowledge will come in useful to me—for punting my ferry-boat across."

"It's not my fault that I can't love you," she cried, with an angry sob.

"You said that too soon, Malka. You should at least have waited till I blamed you for it."

With an impulsive gesture she fumbled for and found his hand, and after a momentary touch immediately let it go again.

"Good night, Nyman," she said.

"Good night, Malka, and tell Baruch I am quite content to wait his time."

She turned back to him with a sudden thought.

"What is the name of the town where Baruch lives?"

"Odessa. At least, I suppose that's where he'll go back to from here."

He saw the drift of her question.

"Odessa. Oh yes, I've heard of it. Is it far?"

"A day's journey. It costs eighteen roubles."

"Eighteen roubles!" she exclaimed in dismay.

"Oh, I shall never earn as much as that."

"Don't let that alarm you. I can make up the rest for you. I have saved something."

"Oh, will you? That's excellent. Of course, I shall send it back to you as soon as ever I can."

"Send it or not—just as you like, Malka."

He watched her as she sped off without another word to him. The sweat had started on his forehead as though with the performance of some huge task. It was a huge task he had just achieved, a herculean task. He had pledged himself to their endless separation. He knew his love was great, but he never knew it was great enough to make him do such desperate things.

From the other side of the river came an importunate call for the ferryman. He made no response. Let them shout, shout till their lungs burst. It pleased him to know that there were other people who could not always get what they wanted. He became aware that his nerveless fingers still held his flute. He broke it and flung it away. He need play no more that night.

CHAPTER XII

MALKA's one idea was to get back as quickly as she could to the Government House. That quarter of an hour's talk with Nyman had not been altogether wasted, but she could have gained all she had gained in much less time. A sense of irreparable loss came over her as she reflected that those superfluous minutes might have robbed her of the opportunity of obtaining a talk with Baruch. As she bitterly repeated to herself he had never, whether purposely or not, given her that opportunity during the daytime. But the evenings might be more propitious—at any rate, it would not be her fault if they were not. So she had plotted and schemed to be asked to stay at the house over nights. That morning she had mentioned casually to Mademoiselle Alma—what a fool Mademoiselle Alma was, to be sure—that the previous night, as she was going home, a man had sprung upon her from the roadside and, if he had not luckily stumbled and come to the ground in his pursuit, he would no doubt have done her serious injury. And at that, in great alarm, Mademoiselle Alma had at once given orders that a room should be prepared for her next to the servants' quarters. And now—could she believe it?—she was going to spend the whole

of the twenty-four hours under the same roof as Baruch! She laughed to herself. Oh, what a happy idea was that imaginary ambushade. And the very next instant her heart came into her mouth, stifling her cry of fear. Yes, undoubtedly, it was a case of crying "wolf." For here, within a hundred yards of the gates, a man lurched suddenly across her path and gripped her tightly by the arm.

"Oho, did I frighten the pretty dear?" he laughed thickly.

"Oh, it's you, your honour," said Malka, her alarm but partially allayed as she recognized Karol.

"It is, it is—though I dare say I should have forgotten who I was if you had kept me waiting here much longer," he laughed again.

"What, have you been waiting for me, your honour?" she asked, with as much unconcern as she could put into her voice. She knew it would be unwise to show him that she thought herself in danger.

"I heard that you were coming back to the house to-night, so I stuck myself here to catch you as you went in. Blessed be the hands that made this road to the house and no other."

"Well, then, had we not better go on?" she said pleasantly.

"Oho, all in good time," he said, steadying himself after another lurch, but keeping his hold on her arm. "Fact is, that I want to talk to you very seriously."

"But we can do that ever so much better indoors."

He tightened his grip as he answered her testily—

"Permit me to know better, Mademoiselle Astarte, or is it Semiramis? No, no, I beg your pardon, I remember now—it's Malka." With his free hand he made a gesture of disdain. "Fancy calling you by a silly, simpering name like Malka, when the mere look of you reminds one of a Pasha's seraglio."

"Malka means a queen," she said, doing her best to fall in with his humour.

"Oh, does it? It's not so bad then. We'll make you the Queen of Sheba on the spot, and at once proceed to the crowning."

He attempted to draw her towards him, but with snake-like litheness she eluded him. He laughed again.

"What, you don't like being made the Queen of Sheba? Well, then, we'll go one better still. Malka, you shall be the Song of Songs. You're the prettiest Song of Songs in petticoats I've ever seen."

"Didn't you have something to say to me?" she reminded him, in the hope of diverting his thoughts.

"Yes, yes, so I did," he said shakily. "Now what in the devil's name was it? Now—now don't rush me; let me get at it slowly or I'll never get at it at all. And I'll keep you waiting here till I do. Ah, yes, I know."

He paused and heaved a hiccoughing sigh which more than anything showed his maudlin condition.

"Fact is, oh Song of Songs, that I want to take you into my confidence."

"But surely, her ladyship, your aunt, would have done better for that."

"Oh, you'll make me die of laughing, you stupid Song of Songs," he guffawed. "Fancy my saying to Aunt Maria what I'm going to say to you. Now listen, and don't make such a fool of yourself again. I came to Ditomar—do you know what I came here for? I came to have a really good time with Cousin Alma, and I'm not having a really good time at all. If you want to know the truth, I'm jolly miserable."

"Are you, indeed, your honour?" said Malka, now oscillating between fear and amusement.

"Oh, don't keep on calling me your honour; you're so dreadfully monotonous, you Song of Songs. Fact is, that I'm in love with Cousin Alma, terribly in love, and she's leading me a fine dance, is the little cat. I believe she hates me. It's the other fellow in there that she likes."

"What other fellow?" asked Malka, with sudden interest. "I see nobody else about the house."

"Now, you've spoken sense for once," said Karol, viciously. "It's quite true he's nobody—not worth talking about. But, the deuce take it, she likes him."

"Him—whom?"

"Why, what's his name—Volkmann."

He could not see the proud smile that played on her features, and if he had seen he would never have puzzled out its meaning. Why, what else did he expect? Was it not the most natural thing in the world that his Cousin Alma should like her Baruch—was there a woman on earth who could refrain from doing the same? But the next instant a great dread chilled her heart.

"And does he like Mademoiselle Alma?" she asked.

"Now, how the devil am I to know that? He's a close chap if ever there was one. And, besides, what difference does it make now that you've taken the matter in your hands?"

"I—what matter?" she inquired astonished.

"Didn't I tell you to get me out of this predicament? Don't stand there looking so like a dunce. I've got it all cut and dried for you. There are two ways, or rather, there are two men. There's Volkmann and myself. Now, I don't care which of us you make to fall in love with you."

She stared at him in open-mouthed bewilderment.

"Surely that's simple enough for you," he said, with a ludicrous touch of reproach. "You see, if you make me fall in love with you, Cousin Alma can go hang. If it's Volkmann you hook, then the road is clear for me. Now, can you beat that for brilliance and originality? The idea came to me over the veal-chops this evening, and I had to lay down my knife and fork and roar, till aunt asked

me—the insulting old frump—if I hadn't drunk too much water. I don't know if I ever told you, but in the regiment they think me the devil for cleverness."

She was still dumb, dizzied by the whirl of conflicting thoughts.

"Now, don't stand there like a duck with her head cut off," he cried, shaking her, "don't let me do all the talking. Let's hear what you've got to say about it."

"I was just thinking," she said, trembling with helpless rage at his rough handling.

"Now mind, you needn't stand on any ceremony, my little Song of Songs," he resumed, apparently pleased with the sound of his dull, expressionless voice. "If it's to be Volkmann, then say so, and we shall be the same good friends as before—better perhaps, because, if you won't mind my telling you, I've got a suspicion that a dozen of you won't be as good fun as one Cousin Alma. Still, I've left the matter in your hands, and being a gentleman, I'll keep my word. They say in the regiment that I keep more words than any other man in the service. Now make me fall in love with you, and, in the devil's name, back you come with me to St. Petersburg. In the twinkling of an eye there'll be the neatest little flat furnished for you, pretty dresses galore, jewellery—all on credit, of course, but that doesn't matter a jot. And then, if ever we get tired of each other, I'll find you a substitute for me, some decent, dashing, young—— Eh, what's that, my dear?"

She had wrenched herself away and stood panting, looking right and left past him, in the hope of being able to slip by. But the burly, towering form in front of her was an effective obstruction. Foiled in her attempt, she covered it with a laugh.

"How silly of me ; I thought I heard footsteps."

He hushed for a moment, listening intently. Then, in a sudden access of rage, he raised his clenched fist.

"Footsteps? Now, don't try to fool me, you wretched Jew-hussy, or, by God . . ."

She took a swift step towards him, so that his fist almost touched her face.

"Oh, please, Karol dear, what chance have I of making you love me if you speak to me like that?"

His arm dropped and his guffaw rose loud and long.

"Oh, you'll do, you artful little minx ; you've got all the tricks of the trade by heart. Strikes me it'll be St. Petersburg for you after all. What do you think?"

"You had better not ask me. You know, you mustn't make it too easy for me, Karol. You will let me go now, won't you?"

He nodded at her in a stupid wiseacre sort of way.

"Yes, you'll do, you'll do, Malka the Queen. And that reminds me—what about the crowning?"

"We'll leave that for next time," she replied, her mind fully made up that there should be no next time.

"Ah, but with me, you know, next time is always this time."

And before she knew what had happened, she found herself pinioned in his embrace and his mouth pressed to hers. Half fainting with fear and indignation, she could offer no resistance. Presently he lifted his head and remarked with a ponderous air of connoisseurship—

"Very good, excellent, myrrh and incense of the East, milk and honey of Canaan. And don't make a mistake, I know what I'm talking about. My experience among you daughters of Shem is not inconsiderable. Easter, two years ago, I happened to eat a bit of your unleavened bread, and to take the taste out of my mouth I vowed to kiss every good-looking Jewess I came across for a month. I kept that vow; I kept it on for an extra week. But you beat everything, Malka the Queen, and that's why you shall come with me to St. Petersburg. And now run off; we mustn't be seen going back into the house together. I've a reputation to lose here."

With horse-play jocularly he pushed, or rather flung her from him, so that she but barely saved herself from measuring her length on the ground. Sobbing quietly, she gathered herself up and fled, tripping and stumbling along with the blind abandon with which some over-sensitive child that has suffered chastisement totters on to a hiding-place for its humiliation. She was sorry she had stayed him from striking her. Perhaps he would have killed her, and that would have been better than this.

Oh, how different was this state of mortified abjectness from the pulsing eagerness with which she had started on her return. And yet the worst of the ordeal through which she had passed was not the gibe, the threatened blow, the achieved caress. Far worse was the nagging thought she carried away with her. Alma loved Baruch, that was right and proper. And then came her own question: did Baruch love Alma? She had sped a random shaft, and now, to her consternation, she found the point of it planted deeply in her own heart. Deeper yet went the point, and that with a sudden thrust, as on passing through the gate she saw upon the verandah Alma's slender, white-clad figure, and next to the white-clad figure—could she mistake him?—Baruch. After the first frantic impulse to spring upon them came an access of crafty prudence. In the thick mulberry bushes, that flanked the gate on the right, she crouched down and watched.

A few minutes later, Karol lurched past her, breathing hard and muttering to himself. He gave no heed to the occupants of the verandah. His eyes, at least his mental vision, were steadfastly fixed on the half-finished bottle of port he had left behind in the smoking-room. No one could say that he, Karol Larmorin, of the Red Dragoons, had gone to bed one night and had left a half-finished bottle of port on the table.

CHAPTER XIII

EARLIER that same evening, the customary *partie carée*, consisting of the Prefect, the baroness, and Monsieur and Madame de Koratoff, had sat down to their game of cards in the drawing-room. Alma, after reading for some time, got tired of her book, and walked over to the piano and let her fingers glide softly over the keys, her eyes looking with absent fixedness into nowhere.

"Excuse me, de Koratoff," said the Prefect, laughing, "that trick doesn't belong to you."

"I say it does," replied the Governor, crossly, spreading the cards he had gathered in, face upwards, on the table.

"That was my queen, if you please," the Prefect pointed out to him genially.

"Quite so, but this is my——"

De Koratoff broke off, his mien more disagreeable still.

"Why, upon my word, I thought I had covered it with the king, instead of which I go under it with the knave! But how on earth can one keep one's attention on the game with that confounded tinkling going on over there?"

"But, Paul, my dear," remonstrated Madame

de Koratoff, "how can you say that? Alma plays divinely, and it's Mendelssohn—'Songs without Words.'"

"We shall have words without songs presently," replied de Koratoff, hotly. "Alma!"

Alma jumped up with a start at the rude summons and came hurrying over to him.

"What is it, papusha, dearest?" she asked anxiously.

De Koratoff took her hand with shamefaced repentance.

"I'm so sorry I startled you, Alma, but your playing distracted me, and I lost a trick."

"Oh, poor papa, did he lose a trick all through my fault?" she said, placing her cheek affectionately to the shining bald spot on the top of his head. "How much does a trick cost, papa? I'll pay for it."

All laughed at her ingenuousness, and the Governor, visibly mollified, directed his attention again to his hand.

"But you mustn't worry us, Alma," he said kindly. "Now, go and sit over there on the verandah, as far away as possible from the piano, and count the stars. That's quite as good as playing Mendelssohn. Where's that scamp of a Karol to-night?"

"Yes, where is he? This is the first time I have known him to be out in the evening," remarked the baroness.

"He may have gone over to the barracks for a change," suggested Madame de Koratoff.

"Volkmann ought to be in presently," said the Prefect. "He had only two or three letters to write."

"Oh, don't trouble about me, you good people," laughed Alma. "I can very well do all my star-counting by myself. No one will kidnap me from the verandah."

Volkmann had caught the last remark while stopping momentarily outside the room to put his cigarette out under his heel. That last remark made him stay out a little longer. He would wait till she had got to the verandah before attempting to follow her there. Else she would probably turn back half way. Her conduct to him of late quite prepared him for that. Her conduct, in fact, as he now told himself for the hundredth time, was passing his comprehension, had become altogether unaccountable. There was no doubt in his mind that on the day of their talk in the summer-house she had shown unmistakable signs of a cordial desire to arrive at a more intimate understanding with him. That day he knew he had made famous progress. And there he had stopped. Since then he had not moved an inch. From that day onward he had noticed, with growing bewilderment, that she took pains to hold herself aloof from him, adopted every precaution against being alone with him. She had even gone so far as to ignore his very presence.

His blank astonishment at the new development had been succeeded by a great fear for the ultimate issue. What if she persisted in avoiding him thus

to the end? Of one thing he had become only too well assured: she was not the doll he had believed her to be. She had given abundant proof of strength, shrewdness, resource. A month was not too much to make a conquest of such as she. A conquest! He hated the word—it was more in keeping with a vulgar intrigue than with the accomplishment of the sacred purpose to which it was the immediate necessity. Only another month! And here, when he had, or might make, his chance, he was dawdling!

He took a grip on himself that seemed to string tight every fibre of his being, and stepped briskly into the room. Giving a pleasant "Good evening" to the four people at the card-table, he made his way straight across the spacious apartment with the stealthy watchfulness of a hunter trapping an unwary wild thing. She was stooping over the fern-pots that lined the balcony, and did not hear him till he was close upon her. He saw her shrink, and then take a step forward. He stopped, with a slight swerve to one side. Their eyes were fixed on each other, his with the silent yet compelling query whether she would avail herself of this chance to escape. For answer she turned slowly back to the verandah balcony, standing close to the parapet. Without an instant's delay, he followed.

They were seemingly both perfectly at ease, with no hint between them of the situation being engineered.

"All alone?" he said lightly. "I don't

remember your cousin ever being out before at night."

"So the baroness was just saying," she replied curtly.

"I wonder what has become of him."

"I don't know. He does not inform me of his movements."

"I am not curious about them myself. His absence interests me only in so much as it gives us the opportunity for this *tête-à-tête*."

She shot him a swift, sharply scrutinizing glance.

"I wonder if you are aware that it's nearly a fortnight since I enjoyed a like privilege," he continued.

"I am not so sure about the privilege, Mr. Volkmann."

"Nor about the fortnight?" he asked, smiling.

"Well, then, let me be exact and say twelve days."

"It may be twelve days. I am sorry I didn't have more time to give you. There were circumstances that prevented it."

"For instance, you had the seamstress in the house."

"Yes, it was a good opportunity for me to cultivate my needlework."

"With the same regard to thrift as in the case of your French, I presume," he said, smiling.

"You may presume what you please," she said quietly. But he saw his jest had been unwise, and that she had registered it in her memory.

"You also spent a great deal of time watching

the old people at their cards. You seemed consumed with a great desire to penetrate into the intricacies of the game. Have you made any progress?"

"As I have not played yet, I can't tell."

"It may interest you to hear that I can speak more definitely of my progress at billiards. I have been very successful. Your cousin Karol can't afford to give me a start any more. Once or twice, in fact, I have beaten him. I think he is growing to respect me greatly."

"I happen to know, Mr. Volkmann, that my cousin Karol respects you very much indeed."

"How is that?" he exclaimed, astonished. "Has he told you?"

"He has not told me, but I know. He has paid you the greatest compliment one man can pay another."

"I wonder what that is, Mademoiselle de Koratoff."

She looked round cautiously, and saw the old people intent on their game. And again she leant over the parapet and scanned the expanse of gloom before her. Then she turned to him with a sudden resolution.

"He has intimated," she said pointedly, "that there is not enough room for both you and him in this world."

He took a step forward, but she waved him back.

"Yes, Mr. Volkmann, I know all," she said, her gaze steady upon him. "Whether there was as much wisdom as there was generosity in your

shielding him, is not for me to decide. But I am exceedingly glad that I discovered the truth. I had my suspicions from the start, and what I heard from the chemist, when I went to him the day after for mamma's headache powders, turned them into a certainty."

"What I fail to see, however," he said searchingly, "is why you should punish me for—what shall I say?—your cousin's indiscretion by boycotting me in the way you have done."

"Is that how you look upon it? I thought you would understand me now, at any rate, even if you did not before. Tell me, was there nothing intentional in your saying before that Karol's absence had secured us this *tête-à-tête*?"

"I meant nothing but what I said."

"Well, but my boycott, as you put it, had a meaning. To speak to you with a frankness which I hope you will appreciate, I had, and still have to be very, very cautious. I don't want to give my cousin cause for further indiscretions. It must be obvious to you that I have been so unfortunate as to attract his—his warm regard."

Volkmann nodded.

"And he chooses to see in the most trifling attention I pay to anybody else a legitimate source of irritation." She shuddered, and then went on rapidly: "I don't like the idea of any member of my family soiling his hands with—murder."

"You say you don't like the idea?" he took her up, flashing at her a quick sardonic smile.

She saw the smile, and, as though to keep herself from replying to him, caught her underlip between her teeth.

He bent forward and spoke slowly, deliberately, each word keen and incisive.

"Suppose, however, Mademoiselle de Koratoff, I were willing to take the risk of your cousin Karol's displeasure, would you consent to discontinue the boycott?"

"No, not even then, Mr. Volkmann," she retorted instantly.

His alarm was tempered somewhat by his incredulity.

"I am sure you will think better of it," he said jesting.

"I will not think of it at all," she replied.

"Well, at any rate, it's due to me that you should state your reason for withholding from me your friendship," he said, irritated by her obstinacy.

"Because I think, Mr. Volkmann, that no friendship is possible between us. Need I say more?"

"Not at all. Your word, of course, must be sufficient. And so I have the honour to wish you a very good evening."

He bowed, and turned quickly on his heel. His heart beat fast, for he knew that everything depended on the next moment. He staked everything on this last hazard—and he won.

"Mr. Volkmann, please stay," she said.

He faced her coldly, and saw her twining her hands in and out with a pitiful irresolution.

"You are perfectly right to look on me as a boor, Mr. Volkmann. Unfortunately, my only other alternative was to appear to you as a fool."

"You are using hard words," he said, regarding her more kindly.

"You will know whether I deserve them," she said. Her manner had become once more pointed, critical, accusatory.

"I shall tell you," he said simply.

"You may remember perhaps what I said to you that afternoon in the summer-house. I spoke to you of impressions, of attitudes. I tried to speak of it as a joke, I tried to make myself believe it a joke. I could not do it, Mr. Volkmann. This last week or two I have said to you very little, but—you will pardon my boldness—I have observed you a great deal."

"And your conclusion?" he asked.

"That your conduct in this house is one sustained *arriere-pensée*—excuse me for airing my French. You sneered again a few moments ago, in the politest possible manner, of course, at the obligation which I suggested I owed to my father. You hinted surprise at my horror of one connected with me by ties of blood burdening his conscience with guilt. Shall I go on, Mr. Volkmann?"

"Certainly. I should like to know all my crimes," he said lamely.

"There is, above all, my woman's intuition of

danger. You are adopting a pose of calculating menace that should prepare me for some deadly injury."

"But you've said all that before," was his grim comment.

"I know. The point is that I am repeating it."

"If it's only for emphasis, it may stand."

"Mr. Volkmann, what have I done to you?" she asked, with an abrupt directness that nearly threw him off his balance.

"Nothing," he replied, recovering himself quickly, "except prove to me the undesirability of any further *tête-à-têtes*."

"I admit I cannot myself understand why the idea should have taken such a hold of me, why it should almost have become an incubus," she said, half to herself, "but such, Mr. Volkmann, it is. Why"—she gave a short apologetic laugh—"I have taken to dreaming of it."

"That makes it rather more serious," he said, altogether at a loss what front to present to this new source of perplexity.

"I dreamt of it two nights ago—a most vivid dream. I saw myself abject and wretched, with my father, pale as one who has received a mortal wound, gazing at me half in pity, half in loathing. You were watching us from out of somewhere in the distance, and then turned from us with a laugh that was still audible long after you had vanished. It was a curious dream, wasn't it?"

"All dreams are more or less curious," he said, but without knowing what he said.

This time she had overwhelmed him, had left him incapable of coping with her. By what inexplicable clairvoyance, by what power of telepathic inference had she copied the picture, which his own imagination had so often painted for him, on to her own brain? The witless doll, whom he had thought unworthy of his man-like effort, had suddenly grown into a formidable sibyll endowed with a talismanic force that should render her superhumanly immune.

But she was no sibyll, no clairvoyant—she was only Alma de Koratoff, and, therefore, she utterly mistook the crushing sense of prostration that bore him down. There was a quaver in her voice as she said to him—

"Mr. Volkmann, I am afraid I have hurt your feelings."

"You may think so if you like," he replied.

"Which means, I suppose," she said quietly, "that it's presumptuous on the part of small insignificant me to think that anything I say or do, or leave unsaid or undone, could possibly ruffle your equanimity."

His self-possession, his equipoise of thought, were rapidly coming back to him. He knew he had every need of them for the crucial moment he was approaching.

"You are quite wrong in that, Mademoiselle de Koratoff," he said. "On the contrary, I value your

opinions highly. I am willing to give you proof of that."

"To give me proof?"

"Yes; by making you a suggestion."

"If it is at all reasonable——" she began.

"You know we have already made two starts," he said; "they were both false, as events showed. Well, let us make a third, and last, I suppose."

"Oh, I should like to—I should like it very much," she replied, her tone showing her uneasiness; "but, you see——"

"I know what you wish to object," he interrupted her. "Very good, then—let us make a bargain. I shall undertake to guard myself against your cousin Karol—and you shall undertake to guard yourself against me."

"Oh, then my fears are grounded," she cried, sharply catching her breath.

He did not answer at once. He was priming his gaze to meet hers without any tell-tale flinching.

"I will admit it to humour your persistence," he said at length.

"That, I suppose, is my penalty for being a woman—to be treated like a child," she sighed.

"But you, in your turn, should admit," he proceeded, as if he had not heard her, "that I have shown a fair amount of patience in the face of your imputations on my sincerity."

"Yes, I have given you a great deal of provocation to be angry," she broke in eagerly.

"Well, the simple reason why I have not got

angry is—may I speak plainly?—is, because it seemed to me so obvious that all the time you were labouring an unnecessary point. You were putting a quite superfluous stress on the nature, the aspect, the object of our relations to one another. What does it all matter? The one and only thing quite definite about our relations is—that they are bound to come to an end. We have drifted into each other's lives in a random, haphazard sort of way, we shall"—he punctuated the words with a shoulder-shrug which might have signified any one of half a dozen emotions—"we shall, in three or four weeks' time, pass out of one another's ken without, perhaps, leaving a single ripple on the surface of our life's current. Is it then worth while, under the circumstances, to trouble about correct attitudes, accurate impressions? Obviously not."

He broke off with a sharp tag, and turned away. He would see if his luck would stand its second test that evening.

"Obviously not, Mr. Volkmann," she echoed—"if we are to pass out of each other's ken for ever."

He did not wait for more. He faced round upon her in a flash.

"What do you mean by that 'if'?" he asked her brusquely.

"I leave it to your construction," she replied, averting her head so that the light from the drawing-room could not play upon it.

"No, no," he said quickly, "you must not do that. In any case the last word will be yours."

Taken off her guard she showed him her full face. He could see she had become very pale.

"And whose is the first?" she asked, smiling tremulously.

"Also yours. Remember who you are—and what I am. I must wait for my cue."

She scrutinized him earnestly, as though ransacking the furthestmost corners of his heart.

"A cue?" she mused.

Then, with an impulsive gesture she extended to him both her hands.

"Will this be sufficient, Mr. Volkmann?"

"I think it will be sufficient," he said.

And before she could guess his intention, he had snatched them up and pressed them to his lips.

"I must go in, Mr. Volkmann," she said abruptly.

But she stopped, and one of her hands went suddenly to her heart.

"And all the time I have forgotten about Karol," she whispered.

"You have,—but I have not," he assured her. "I have thought of an easy way of circumventing him, a very easy way. It would enable us to—commune with each other without his being any the wiser, even if he had a hundred eyes to spy on us, and a hundred ears to listen."

"What is your way?" she asked with keen interest.

"Pen and paper, and just one unobserved moment."

He gauged the boldness of his proposal, and was

fully prepared for a sharp refusal. Reading her thoughts like an open book, he saw that the question she deliberated was whether she was not exchanging one danger for another, and that a greater. And so his triumph was all the more thorough when she replied—

“Very good, I agree. But,” and she raised her finger in stern warning, “remember, Mr. Volkmann, it will depend altogether on what you write whether there will be answer.”

“I shall certainly bear it in mind,” he said, as he followed her leading the way back to the drawing-room.

The players had just finished their game, and had risen from the table. De Koratoff came forward to meet them.

“Alma, dear,” he said, linking his arm in hers, “now that you have left off boring Mr. Volkmann, I want you to bore me for a few minutes. Give me a little Mendelssohn, will you?”

“Why, of course I will, papusha mine,” she said, her face lighting up with pleasure at the implied *amende honorable*.

There was nothing strange in a father asking for the society of his daughter, but as he watched them passing to the piano, Volkmann had an ominous instinct—he had come to see omens in everything—that this morose-looking man would step in again, as he had stepped in just now, between him and this girl, upon whose subversion he was directing the whole machinery of his mind. He remained wrapt for a

brief while in the exquisite music, exquisitely rendered by her, though marred somewhat by de Koratoff's attempt at a vocal accompaniment, which, atrociously out of tune, and uttered in a rumbling bass grotesquely out of keeping with the delicate texture of the melody, eventually proved too strong for Volkmann's nerves. With a few pleasant words of good night to the company in general, and a silent, significant look at Alma, who acknowledged it unequivocally, he left the room.

An inexpressible craving had come over him to be alone with the incompatible mood of satisfaction and vexation which the evening's experience had left upon him. He had every reason to be satisfied with himself. He had become assured, beyond all doubt, that he had the power of playing upon her feelings. He was becoming to her a strong influence. The happy inspiration, which had suggested to him an interchange of written communications, had given him all the means he required to strengthen that influence. Her veiled warning that he must not presume too much on her permission meant nothing. On the contrary, it was a womanly touch that pleased him. It was the action of a woman who set some value on herself, whose self-respect made her shrink from being lightly wooed and lightly won. Their acquaintance was too young for expressed outspokenness; it warranted, as yet, nothing more than a decorous reading between the lines. Very well, she should be obeyed. She did not know that her very restriction had set him free

to employ his greatest art—his master talent for innuendo. He would treat her to phrases whose very covertness should stir her soul as it had never been stirred before.

And now, having done so well, why this vexed discontent? Were the answer not too absurd, it would have been—just because he had done so well. As he stepped along the dimly lit corridor, indented with numerous niches and recesses, it seemed to him symbolic of ambushes and treachery. A vague notion came to him that henceforth this was his fit element, this atmosphere of murk and mystery. He had lost the right to walk openly in the sunshine. He repressed an angry cry. Was he beginning to quarrel with himself for what he was doing, had done? No, the end justified the means—the sophism was current coin all the world over. He would not even argue it out with himself.

He could not, for just then, from one of those ambushing recesses, the figure of Malka loomed up before him.

"I have taken your message to Nyman," she said eagerly.

"What message?"

"Don't you remember? That the work was in hand, but that you had as yet no——"

"Yes, quite so," he cut her short.

Why had he been in such haste? If he had waited a day he would have had other news to send Nyman.

"Thank you, Malka," he said, and was about to pass on.

"Don't you want to know what he said?" she asked, keeping up with him, her words full of quivering disappointment.

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said that he was quite content to wait."

"I thought he would say that. I thank you again, Malka."

"Is that the way to thank one—by running away from me?" she cried hoarsely.

"I know it's very rude of me, Malka," he replied conciliatorily, "but I am very tired. Have you anything else to tell me?"

"Oh, haven't I," she said provocatively.

He came to a halt. He could not mistake the menace in her voice.

"Well, I'm quite ready to listen," he prompted her impatiently.

"The young officer spoke to me," she replied instantly. "He said that you were in love with the young lady in the house."

"He told you a lie," cried Volkmann, with a vehemence which surprised even himself.

"He also said he would take me with him to St. Petersburg," continued Malka, seemingly unmoved.

Her indifference shocked him.

"Was it for this that you took your shears with you to your hiding-place, Malka?" he asked her, meaningly.

"Oh, but I don't want to go with him," she burst out; "I want to go with you, Baruch, and if I don't—who knows . . ."

"No, no, Malka ; you mustn't threaten me—you mustn't bring this pressure to bear on me," he cried angrily. "You can't come with me, I don't know at all what my plans will be." Then he remembered that he must deal delicately with her. She was dangerous material. "At any rate, it's impossible for me to consider it for the present."

"Oh, you are good—you give me hope."

And before he could prevent her, she had snatched up his hands and covered them with kisses.

"To remind you what is due, not from a king to others, but from others to a king," she whispered, as she glided noiselessly away.

There was only one thing to which Volkmann could give his thoughts for the rest of the evening till he fell into a troubled sleep—the egregious lie which Karol had told.

CHAPTER XIV

SOME days later, it might be a week or so, the Prefect entered his wife's room, an open letter in his hand, and a no less open air of discontent on his face.

"I regret, my dear, that I have to be the bearer of disagreeable tidings," he said.

"I know—you are summoned back to Odessa," she hazarded.

"Not quite so bad as that, Adèle," he replied, "but I am afraid we shall have to cut our visit here short by a week. The Commissioner of Police writes me to say that His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke has altered his plans, and that instead of paying his long-promised visit to Odessa in the autumn, he wishes to honour us at the beginning of next month. That leaves us no choice but to go away from here on the twenty-fifth, or the twenty-sixth at the latest, doesn't it?"

"Of course, we have no choice," the baroness agreed thoughtfully.

"I am very sorry, Adèle. I should have liked to eke out every moment of this halcyon holiday. I find I am recuperating wonderfully, my dear, I am getting a perfect rest in mind and body. You know,

my dear, sometimes I feel as though we were having our honeymoon over again—don't you?"

"I also have a reason for regretting our earlier departure," she said.

"It can't be a more romantic reason," he said reproachfully.

"No, but it's a more sensible one," she replied dryly. "I should have liked to stay as long as possible for de Koratoff's sake."

"Ha, I refuse to be jealous, Adèle," laughed the Prefect.

"Don't be absurd, Sergei. Have you noticed any change in him?"

"In de Koratoff? Well, Maria insists that there is a marvellous change for the better."

"That was at the beginning, the first few days after our arrival. Lately she has not been so enthusiastic. For my part, I am quite sure there is some trouble weighing on his mind. Did you notice his outburst of ill-temper against little Alma the other night—his little Alma, upon whom he won't allow the winds of heaven to blow roughly? There is something wrong with him, Sergei. He is trying to keep it down, out of consideration for us, I suppose, but there can't be any doubt that he doesn't feel quite at ease."

"How could he, with you under his roof?" laughed the Prefect.

"Do be serious, Sergei," she reproved him. "The longer we stay, the better our chances of finding out what the matter is."

The Prefect shook his head with indulgent impatience.

"Really, Adèle, I don't think there is another woman like you for seeing bogies by daylight. When we get back I shall have to take you to consult a nerve specialist. Won't you take warning from the way in which your suspicions concerning Volkmann, Alma, and Karol were knocked on the head?"

"I am not altogether sure that they were—disproved," replied the baroness, energetically.

"Oh, what's up now, pray? Why, I don't remember even seeing them talk to each other."

"Well, that's exactly what I don't like about them. What business have such young people to be mysterious? They ought to be sent out into the garden and, under severe penalties, ordered to have a good romp together. I shouldn't have the slightest hesitation in joining them myself. No, no, Sergei, I am quite sure that, despite their seeming estrangement, there is some sort of an understanding between Alma and Volkmann. Yesterday I fancied I saw them passing notes to each other. The fact that they are never seen talking together only gives colour to my theory. And then there is Karol, rather out of the picture now, but hovering about in the background, with a sleuth-hound air about him of which, by the way, they themselves seem perfectly cognizant. I have said nothing to Maria. You know how easily she gets alarmed."

"Maria has not a monopoly of being alarmed,"

said the Prefect, with a mock shiver. "To hear you talk, Adèle, this house is simply a conglomeration of horrors. Volkmann, Alma, Karol, de Koratoff—all in trouble, with the comforting promise of worse in store. Upon my word, Adèle, we ought to be glad of an excuse to get away from here before we are ourselves caught in the meshes of mischief."

"I won't go so far as that, Sergei," said the baroness, feeling that she perhaps *had* gone too far. "You need not, of course, believe all I say, but I am sure that I am not altogether wrong."

"Which means, my dear, that you are not altogether right. But whether you are or are not, Adèle, I strictly forbid you to worry. You are not to think of anything or anybody except yourself—and me, if you can spare the time. Above all, get rid of your latest mare's nest about de Koratoff. And now, if you please, I am going to take you for your favourite drive through the forest clearing."

But just as much as the Prefect, had his sight been keener and his optimism less pronounced, would have refrained from poo-pooing his wife's renewed anxiety with regard to developments among the younger inmates of the house, so he would have been compelled to pay her greater perspicacity in the case of de Koratoff a high tribute, had he seen the Governor pace the length and breadth of his sanctum that same afternoon. The heavy features were clouded and worn, the thick grizzled moustache drooped more moodily than ever, and the narrow cleft between the shaggy eyebrows had disappeared

altogether. Not even the sunniest of optimists could have maintained that de Koratoff had the look of a man contented with himself or with the rest of the world. Significant, too, was the hasty effort with which he did his best to smooth his ruffled mien at the sound of a tapping at the door.

He did not answer, but stepped up and opened it himself, to the extent of half an inch. He saw Alma.

"Am I disturbing you, papa?" she asked timidly.

"No, my dear child," he said, making way for her. "Come in; I'm glad to see you."

"And me, too, uncle?" asked Karol, following her in, without waiting to be included in the invitation.

"I won't keep you a moment, papa," said Alma, hurriedly. "I have only come to tell you that there are half a dozen rough-looking men downstairs who want to speak to you."

"Ah, the mujiks," said de Koratoff.

"Then you've been expecting them, papa, have you?" asked Alma, struck by something curious in his voice and manner.

"Expecting them?" echoed the Governor, sharply. "Certainly not. I have no idea of what they want of me."

"Well, papa, what shall I do? Shall I send them away?" asked Alma.

"Why, of course send them away," interposed Karol. "I told her to do so as soon as I saw them,

uncle. They're supposed to be a deputation, don't you know," he added with a laugh.

De Koratoff wrinkled his brows angrily.

"Perhaps you will allow me to manage my own affairs, Karol. Tell them to come in, Alma."

Karol turned away, treating the snub with assumed jauntiness. Alma had got as far as the door when the Governor called after her—

"They will dirty the carpets. Let them take their boots off before they come in."

"They can't, papa," said Alma, sadly. "They are all barefoot."

De Koratoff sat down at his writing-desk, and adopted a severely official pose. In a few moments Alma reappeared, and, with the help of two or three soldiers in uniform, ushered in the deputation. A heart-rending sight they made, that little crowd of human scarecrows, who shuffled into the room awkward and embarrassed by their evident consciousness of being ludicrously out of place in the imposing, well-appointed apartment to which they had been admitted. Nothing could exceed the tattered unkempt wretchedness of their appearance, appalling was the frank undisguised sordidness to which not even the importance of their errand had induced them to put a redeeming touch. Terrible, too, in its obviousness was the uncertainty and fear of the issue that peered out of their haggard eyes.

An unpleasant incident marked the beginning of the interview. Sneering and insolent, Karol had planted himself near the door to get a better view of

the peasants filing in. The youngest of them, more gauche and slovenly than the rest, shambling on in the rear, his eyes seeking the ground in fluttering sheepishness, cannoned up against him. With a brutal oath Karol gripped him by the shoulders and hurled him full tilt into the cowering group. The young peasant went down like a log, bringing down with him two of his companions in his fall. For a moment or two there was an awed silence, and then the hapless lout, realizing the enormity of his offence, hastily scrambled to his knees, and so dragged himself towards Karol, muttering incoherent excuses all the while. And then, in a final burst of grotesque self-abasement, he caught the edge of Karol's smoking-jacket to his lips.

With a loud laugh Karol pulled himself away and walked from the room. The young peasant had sprung to his feet, and watched him, still trembling with fear, but with the sheepish look gone from his face, and in its place suggesting the intelligent sullenness of an ill-treated dog. There seemed to have been more of teeth than of lips in his abject salute. Alma was standing close to her father's chair, an indignant but silent observer of the scene. The Governor, too, had made no comment. Whatever his thoughts, an indulgent smile played about his mouth. Not that he was amused, but it would not do to show these slaves that anything their masters did could be wrong.

"What do you people want?" he asked, leaning forward and eyeing them with not unkindly interest.

The peasants were crowding together in a knot, but at his question they fell back a step, leaving one of their number to stand out in front alone. He was an old man, stoop-shouldered and grey-bearded, but with a certain dignity and self-possession in his bearing that could not but inspire respect.

"Come, speak. What do you want?" de Koratoff asked again.

"Before everything, your Excellency, to beg your Excellency's most gracious pardon for intruding on your Excellency's privacy," the old man said, bending almost double over the gnarled stick round the knob of which he was clasping supplicatory hands. There were tears in his eyes and voice as he proceeded: "Oh, your Excellency, we have come to tell you that things are going exceedingly badly with us. Look at me, your Excellency. I am turned seventy-three, and I still have to toil with my hands, because two of my sons have died while serving the Emperor, and my only other son could not give me a crust of bread which he would not first have to snatch from the mouths of his own hungry bairns. Yes, your Excellency, turned seventy-three I am, and I still must follow the plough. And from that, your Excellency can see how sore our straits are."

"I believe you. But what can I do for you?" asked de Koratoff, who had followed him attentively.

"We would ask your Excellency to help us," continued the old peasant. "We would ask your Excellency to save us from perishing. In the name of the virgin mother and all the calendar saints, we

would humbly ask your Excellency to exercise your power and your mercy on our behalf. Who can do for us as much as your Excellency? You alone can intercede for us with the Little Father, the great White Czar, and ask him to have pity on us, and not allow us to be destroyed utterly. If you will do this for us—oh, your Excellency, we will bless you with our latest breath.”

“But this is all so vague. What is the use of speaking in such general terms?” exclaimed the Governor, impatiently. “Come to the point. Tell me exactly what it is you require.”

“Willingly will I do so, your Excellency,” replied the spokesman in a more pitiful whine. “Your Excellency is, of course, aware that the harvest is growing ripe, and is nearly ready to be gathered in. But we have no scythes to cut the corn; we have no threshing-floors wherein to store it; we have neither horses nor carts in which to take it to the market-place. It will lie there in the autumn rains and rot, and we shall sit by gnawing our finger-tips to the raw. And presently there will come the seed-time, and we shall have no seed. Our ploughshares are crumbling to pieces with the rust; and then—and then—oh, your Excellency, will come the winter. Your Excellency will be kind enough to remember that we have been very patient, and that we have not assailed your Excellency’s ears with importunate clamours. It is now two years since we last made our humble petition to your Excellency, and your honour’s Excellency promised then that we should

be speedily helped. And since then we have waited and waited, without a murmur, knowing that the Little Father has many children ; but now the sword is at our throats, and we shall die."

A dark flush had spread over de Koratoff's face at the concluding sentences, and, forgetting his official repose, he had shifted uneasily in his chair. He made no immediate reply, but bent over the sheet of foolscap on his desk and wrote busily.

"Very well," he said, looking up at last, but so that his gaze ranged over the heads of the deputation, "I have made a note of your representations, and they shall be forwarded to the proper quarter. More than that I cannot tell you at present. Meanwhile, keep on praying to the saints, and don't drink so much vodka. You may go."

There was an indistinct murmur from the little group which might as easily have been construed into an expression of remonstrance as of gratitude. Then they filed out slowly as they had entered, the old man remaining the last behind to direct one final glance of appeal and heart-break at the arbiter of their destinies. But it was wasted on de Koratoff, for he had bent down again over his foolscap, and it was, perhaps, the stooping position that had brought the dark flush back to his face. It was wasted likewise on Alma, who, long before the end of the interview, had turned her back to the petitioners and kept gazing fixedly through the window.

"They have gone, papa," she said, looking round presently.

"I know, my dear," he replied a little peevishly. "It was useless to let them stay longer. I heard all they wanted to say."

She came and put her arm round his neck.

"Oh, the poor things," she whispered.

"Yes, it's very sad," he said, nodding concurrence.

"You will try to help them, of course, papa."

"I shall do my best."

"But they said that they came to you already two years ago," she persisted, "and that nothing was done for them. How did that happen, papa?"

De Koratoff put his hand across his face, as though to aid his retrospective vision by shutting off the sight of outward visible things. Perhaps also it was to shield himself from the affectionately inquisitive glance his daughter was turning upon him.

"My dear child, I really don't remember exactly what occurred," he said slowly; "and in any case it wouldn't interest you if I went into details. I need only tell you that I, as in duty bound, made an application on their behalf to the Ministry of Agriculture. There was a great deal of wearisome correspondence and any amount of red-tape, until in the end they got tired of their own roundabout methods, and——"

"And what, papa?"

"And dropped the thing altogether."

"Oh, how wrong of them—how cruel!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing indignation.

"Quite so, quite so," commented de Koratoff, feebly.

"And is that what has made you so serious and distracted this last week or two, papusha?" she asked, tightening her arm round his neck.

"It is, my dear child," he said, rising from his chair and disengaging himself from her embrace. "I knew, of course, that their distress was coming to a head, and that they intended to approach me in my official capacity."

"But, oh, papa, don't be angry with me for saying it," she faltered, "but why—why did you wait till they came to you?"

"I did not wait, Alma," he replied, not with the best of grace, despite her pleading. "I have given the matter my earnest consideration long before this. For months, I may say, I have been turning over in my mind what would be the best way of helping them."

"And have you found anything?" she asked eagerly.

"I think I am getting to see my way to it," he replied, but his impatience at her interrogatories was becoming very patent. That, however, did not prevent her from exclaiming enthusiastically—

"Oh, I knew I had the cleverest and kindest-hearted man for a papa!"

He winced at her praise.

"Don't be so lavish with your superlatives," he said, stroking her cheek. "My intentions are good,

but how can I answer for the result? Nothing is certain in this life."

"Nothing, papa, except that we love one another, eh, papa? Now let me give you one good hug, and then you'll be rid of me."

He submitted smilingly. As she clung to him a sudden impulse, ending in an almost painful indecision, sent a faint roseate flush into her cheeks. Her lips trembled as though with words that struggled for but did not attain to utterance. Then, with a wrench, that seemed like a movement of self-defence, she tore herself away and hurried from the room.

Her anxiety as to how much her father had observed of her strange irresolution was perfectly unnecessary. De Koratoff had observed nothing. After that keen initial glance at the deputation he had only heard, not seen. And his daughter's scrutiny he had avoided even more persistently than theirs. Now he was alone again he might admit the reason frankly to himself: he did not want either her or the aged peasant, who had spoken so eloquently for his inarticulate comrades, to see in his eyes the self-accusation with which he answered their piteous appeal. He could now admit to himself, as he had done for many a month, which was all the forethought for them of which he had spoken to Alma, that he had wronged these poor wretches with a deadly wrong, and that all their misery lay at his door. It was not true that his request for assistance to the destitute peasants two years ago

had been refused by the Minister. On the contrary, the sum of twelve thousand roubles had been remitted to him for distribution amongst them. The whole of this amount he had perverted to his private use. The greater part of it, he recalled, had gone to the purchase of a team of magnificent greys as an ostensible birthday present for his wife, an extravagance which the latter had never ceased to bewail, and which was rendered all the more deplorable by the accident which shortly afterwards befell one of the horses, making it necessary for the beautiful animal to be destroyed. De Koratoff had seen in it at the time an omen that he would live to regret his unconscionable act.

He had indeed lived to regret it. The deputation that afternoon had impressed on him more forcibly than ever the peril of his position. The state of unparalleled distress which his dishonesty had done so much to produce, would not, and could not, remain a secret within the four corners of his own district. Rumours of it would filter out into the higher spheres of the official world, an inquiry would be instituted—he had numerous ill-wishers, who, when their chance came, would not spare him—that inquiry might lead to other inquiries, and the end might be ruin and disgrace. And that must never be—never, never! He thumped the solid mahogany table again and again till his clenched fist tingled with pain. Not that he cared so much for himself. He knew his career had come to a standstill. He had gone as far as he would ever

go. He had made a particularly brilliant start, and had attained to his present position at a comparatively early age, with promise of still more rapid preferment. And then, by an ill-considered act, he had drawn on himself the implacable ill-will of the Court clique. And so he had been left to moulder here in contemptuous oblivion, as though it were paying him too high a compliment to acknowledge his existence by dismissing him from his post. There were other means than Siberia of relegating a man into exile.

But that did not guarantee that they would continue to ignore him if he gave them a more positive hold on him. And an exposure—— What would it mean for his darling daughter Alma, the one gleam of brightness which irradiated his gloomy life? He would ill requite the solace she had been to him by darkening the glowing promise of her future with the shadow of her father's shame. No, come what may, his daughter Alma should walk in triumph through the bright spheres which one day would be her world, a joy and a guiding-star to others, instead of lurking, secret and outcast, in crevices and corners where her stigma would not show so black against the enfolding blackness.

He pulled himself up short. He could see that he was harrying himself into a panic. There was no cause for that—yet. The mujiks must be quietened, the maws crammed. Though his own exchequer was empty, and his bank account heavily overdrawn, there were other methods of doing it—

at least one other method. It was easy and it was safe, if he would but utilize properly the resources at his disposal. The mujiks would be satisfied, more than satisfied. All they expected was to be helped by others. Being, of course, men of vast self-respect, it would come as a pleasant surprise to them to be shown a straightforward way of helping themselves.

CHAPTER XV

IT was with a view to arrange for the proper utilizing "of the resources at his disposal," that de Koratoff the following morning made a somewhat uncere-monious entry into the room where the Prefect and Volkmann were transacting their correspondence.

"Can you give me five minutes, Prefect?" he asked, closing the door behind him carefully.

"Five minutes! An hour, if you like, my dear friend," replied the Prefect, not a little surprised at de Koratoff's special call, seeing that they were to meet an hour later for a game of bowls, when they would have ample opportunity for a confidential talk.

The next instant de Koratoff furnished him with a spontaneous explanation.

"It's a matter of business, Prefect, more fittingly discussed in a business atmosphere," he said.

Volkmann rose unostentatiously and prepared to withdraw.

"No, don't go, Volkmann," continued de Koratoff, quickly. "In fact, I should prefer you to stay. I am not at all sure that part of my reason for coming here was not to have the benefit of your presence at my colloquy with the Prefect. It concerns certain administrative matters of a rather

private nature, but " —he smiled with an assumption of benevolence—"seeing that you are a full-fledged member of the bureaucracy, it might be instructive to you to be trusted with the experiences of much older hands."

"I feel highly honoured by your Excellency's confidence," said Volkmann, bowing and re-seating himself.

"You may have to pay for the honour by some inconvenience later on," said the Governor, with an awkward laugh. "Now, my dear Prefect, to come to the point. The mujiks round here are in a ferment again."

"I heard there was a deputation to you yesterday," said the Prefect, gravely.

"They came to tell me that their harvest is jeopardized unless they get money for new implements and fresh cattle. The situation is serious, almost desperate. They are threatened with starvation. They suggested I should write to the Minister."

"Of course, you will do so," said the Prefect.

"There are reasons why I should not do so," retorted de Koratoff, naturally, however, without going into detail as to these reasons. "I am quite sure that my request will receive no attention. At the very most it will bring down on me a severe reprimand from high quarters for not having managed the affairs of my district better. You see, I am quite frank, Volkmann."

"I appreciate your frankness, your Excellency,

although I don't for a moment share your apprehensions," smiled Volkmann.

"I happen to know better, my young friend," the Governor said darkly.

Then his mouth contracted, and he planted himself more sturdily on his feet. Evidently he was nerving himself for an effort. He continued, resolutely—

"And since I can hope for no help for them from St. Petersburg, I must give them the means of accommodating their necessities from the resources close at hand."

"Accommodating their necessities!—resources close at hand!" echoed the Prefect, astonished. "What resources? Have you discovered a gold-mine for them?"

"In a manner of speaking, I have," replied de Koratoff, truculently. "My gold-mine is—the Jews."

"The Jews?"

The Prefect half rose at his own exclamation, shooting an involuntary and startled glance at Volkmann. The latter, however, remained sitting, rigid and unmoved, showing no change even to the half-smile of tense interest with which he had been following de Koratoff's words.

"Yes, certainly, the Jews," repeated the latter, his manner fierce and bristling. "It is time that my unfortunate peasants should have an opportunity of turning the tables on these devils who have made life an earthly purgatory for them. "Tell me," he

said, addressing himself more particularly to Volkmann, "who is mainly responsible for all the calamities that are besetting our unhappy country if not these cursed parasites? Who is it, if not these blood-suckers, that are draining us dry of what is best in us, our energy, our vitality? Who, I would ask you, is throwing out of gear all our machinery of state, who is complicating our international relations?"

"They are undoubtedly, your Excellency" remarked Volkmann, without the tremor of an eyelash, "an important factor to reckon with in the economy of this country."

"For our sins," supplemented de Koratoff, more sinister and threatening than before. "You can't of course, know them half as well as I do, my dear Volkmann, but you may believe me when I say that there is not a trick or device which the Evil One has not taught them for our undoing. Their methods are an insidious magnetism making the wealth of the country gravitate towards them, turning our well-to-do into beggars, and our beggars into beasts quarrelling with swine for the garbage of the wayside. And now let them beware of the monsters which they themselves have created!"

The Prefect had listened, squirming with discomfort, until the consistent calm of Volkmann's demeanour assured him effectively that he need fear no unpleasant consequences to de Koratoff's outbreak.

"Well, my dear de Koratoff," he interposed,

soothingly, "if you ask me, I certainly have not observed any signs of superabundant wealth among the Jews in this neighbourhood."

"You must blame your own short-sightedness for that, Perfect," replied de Koratoff. "I tell you, they are sly as foxes and secret as moles."

"Is it not a fact, your Excellency, that there were anti-Jewish disturbances here last winter?" Volkmann asked, in a casual sort of way.

De Koratoff shot him a piercing look.

"What makes you say that?" he asked in turn.

"Oh, I heard a chance reference to it—from one of the shopkeepers in the town."

"Which shopkeeper?" de Koratoff inquired quickly.

"I am afraid I don't recollect, your Excellency. No doubt the matter was grossly exaggerated," suggested Volkmann, darting a swift side-glance at de Koratoff.

"The whole thing turned out a flash in the pan. The Jews ran one way, and the mujiks another."

"The rioters ran?" asked Volkmann.

"There seems to have been some misunderstanding. The military appeared on the scene too soon, and some blockhead of a subaltern, anxious to show his authority, I suppose, stopped the proceedings."

"How unfortunate!" said Volkmann. "And now, if your Excellency will be so good as to inform me—but perhaps your Excellency may deem the question impertinent."

"Oh, by no means, my dear Volkmann—ask

away," said de Koratoff, evidently delighted with the intelligent interest Volkmann was displaying.

"I only want to know what steps your Excellency wishes to take with regard to the forthcoming movement."

"I shall make it my business to see that this time there is no misunderstanding," replied de Koratoff, significantly. "The garrison on the other side of the river will have more explicit instructions, and the mujiks shall know that there will be no officious schoolboys to interfere."

"Your Excellency, in fact, will see that the military and the mob should play into each other's hands," said Volkmann, "or even co-operate openly."

"Quite so. It will depend on circumstances," said de Koratoff.

The Prefect had listened frowning, and eyeing Volkmann with undisguised astonishment.

"Is it really necessary, de Koratoff? Is there no other way?" he asked at last.

"None that I can see, Prefect," was the instant reply.

"Let me persuade you to think again, de Koratoff. I am quite sure that the chief reason why you have taken us into your confidence is to give some one the chance of working upon your better judgment."

"That's not a very good guess, my dear Prefect," laughed de Koratoff. "But I am coming to it now. The reason why I have informed you of what is about to happen is to make you a party to my scheme."

"God forbid!" exclaimed the Prefect, fervently.

De Koratoff bit his lip, but otherwise gave no token of the chagrin he felt.

"You misunderstand me, my dear friend," he said smoothly. "I am not asking you for your active co-operation in any shape. The arrangements must naturally remain in my hands. Nor could I suggest your sharing with me the responsibility of the incident. That would be absurd. But I think, Sergei, I have sufficient claim on you by virtue of our friendship to bespeak your assistance should occasion arise. The affair will probably make a noise. These Jews yell like fury if you merely set a toy-terrier at them. A commission may be appointed to sit on it, and I may get rather heckled. But I shall not be afraid of anything if I have your moral support."

"Moral support!" the Prefect could not help echoing, moved by the obvious irony of the phrase.

"Well, your verbal corroboration, Sergei," conceded de Koratoff, with a sickly smile. "You happened to be staying with me at the time of the incident—that's as good a word for it as any, isn't it? You were staying with me three or four weeks previous to it, and that had given you time, you and your able secretary here, to make a very close study of the conditions of the district. You found an intolerable state of things produced by the rapacity and nefarious dealings of the local Jews. You personally came across some shocking instances of their extortionateness and their sharp practices against

the surrounding mujiks. The facts and figures will be furnished to you in detail by-and-by. In your opinion there could be no other outcome than this act of reprisal. Do you follow me, my dear Sergei?"

It was, however, Volkmann who answered.

"His Excellency, the Prefect, is to state this in evidence, while you would pay me the compliment of asking me to confirm it?"

"Perfectly, perfectly, my dear Volkmann," said the Governor, his face lighting up at the other's ready comprehension, which seemed to carry with it approval. "In your own case, however, I shall not, as I hinted before, be satisfied with your being merely a secondary witness. I would request you to put yourself to the trouble—which you may rest assured I should appreciate at its fullest value—of drawing up an independent report, marked by all the ability and luminousness, his praises of which the Prefect is never weary of dinning into my ears."

"I don't know to which of your two Excellencies I am to address my thanks first," said Volkmann, his voice taking to itself a momentary tinge of warmth. Then it became cold and practical once more as he continued, turning a full front to the Governor. "Why did your Excellency not think some such precautions as these necessary on the last occasion?"

"A legitimate question, Volkmann," de Koratoff replied readily. "On the last occasion, even if there had been an inquiry, nothing could possibly have been brought home to me. This time I am

laying myself open to certain risks. The leaders of the mob, for instance, will have to be told they are going to be allowed a free hand."

"Which, your Excellency, in other words, means—bloodshed," came quietly from Volkmann.

De Koratoff shrugged his shoulders.

"Suppose it does, my dear Volkmann? One can't make omelettes without breaking eggs. Well, Prefect," he continued, turning abruptly to the latter, "what have you to tell me?"

The Prefect collected himself with a start. He had been listening to de Koratoff's laboured explanations with but half an ear. He was mainly occupied in controlling his ever-growing astonishment at the attitude Volkmann had taken up towards de Koratoff's proposals. His answer came slowly.

"I tell you I am still of opinion that your method is too drastic, not to say ill-advised. The remedy might be worse than the disease—for you. Nevertheless, should I be called upon, I dare say you will not find me lacking in *esprit de corps*."

"There's a good man," cried de Koratoff, joyously. "Your assurance, Sergei, was all that I really needed. I can go ahead now. Don't forget—in the bowling-alley, at eleven o'clock."

Volkmann had also risen to accompany him to the door.

"The Prefect still seems a little difficult," whispered de Koratoff. But I can leave him to you, Volkmann, can't I?"

"Yes, your Excellency, leave him to me."

"I must confess, Volkmann, I simply don't know what to think of your behaviour," said the Prefect, bluntly, as Volkmann re-seated himself at the table. "Were you really serious in encouraging de Koratoff in this terrible project of his?"

Volkmann's head sank low on his chest. All the sprightliness and alertness of a few moments ago had gone from his manner. He looked what he felt—broken and spent.

"What else could I do, your Excellency?" he said wearily. "It was my only chance of drawing him out. I wanted to know exactly how far he was prepared to go."

"And you succeeded only too well," commented the Prefect.

Volkmann nodded a silent assent.

"This puts you in a great predicament," continued the Prefect, glancing keenly at him from under his eyebrows.

Volkmann sat up, with a determined effort to pull himself together.

"It does; but not a greater one than I should have been prepared for, your Excellency," he replied bitterly.

"I don't quite see that, Volkmann. How could you possibly have foretold that de Koratoff would just choose the period of our stay to put his plan into execution?"

"I could answer your Excellency," said Volkmann, "but it would mean opening a large question, and your Excellency's time is too valuable."

He reached out for his penholder; but the Prefect stayed him by placing a peremptory hand on his arm.

"I think I have also shown an occasional interest in large questions, Volkmann," he said half reproachfully.

"I mean, your Excellency, that this one is almost beyond the range of human disposition. I touch but the veriest fringe of it when I say that all through the history of my race one can trace an ironic spirit of retribution which has overtaken those who have wilfully cut themselves adrift from the body corporate. It was foolish of me to expect that I should remain exempt. Pray do not misunderstand me, your Excellency. I owe you nothing but gratitude for your kindness and good intentions. But in proof of this ironic spirit I will confess to your Excellency that I originally accepted my present post because I one day hoped to be placed in a predicament such as this. But I had also hoped to be able to grapple with it. This is altogether beyond me."

"You can warn them," said the Prefect, thoughtfully.

"What use would that be? They were warned last time. It will only put them on the rack, but it will not stave off disaster. In the best of cases, what chance have they got? The better they are prepared, the harder it will go with them."

"Then what will you do?"

"Carry out M. de Koratoff's parting injunction to me."

"And that was?"

"To try and make your Excellency less difficult."

"You are unstrung, my dear Volkmann," said the Prefect, sympathetically. "We will leave our correspondence for another time. Go and give your nerves a rest."

"Thank you, your Excellency," replied Volkmann, as he got up from the table and, with a mechanical salute, left the room.

CHAPTER XVI

It was only in the solitude of his own room that the full horror of the situation he had so unexpectedly been called upon to handle broke in on Volkmann's mind. Whilst in de Koratoff's presence he had had to exercise every fibre of his mental and bodily strength to give no hint of the real object of his simulated interest in the Governor's confidences. And later on the Prefect's undisguised sympathy had filled him for a few moments with a delusive sense of not standing utterly alone. But apart from that the Prefect had offered him no help—what help, indeed, had he to offer? De Koratoff was perfectly free, within his own limits, to do as he pleased; and the Prefect, having failed in his purely personal intercession, could not do otherwise than to treat the rebuff to his powers of persuasion with diplomatic indifference. A feeling of terrifying loneliness came over Volkmann at the thought. He clapped his hands to his eyes, as though to shut out the *impasse*, the vista of blank impossibility which opened out before him.

The sole idea that was quite clear to him consisted in the fact that the solution of the two tremendous problems that faced him now, the achieving of his

revenge and the saving of his co-religionists, was centred in one and the same person—in Alma de Koratoff. Beyond that his thoughts fluctuated wildly. He could not even say whether this coincidence halved or doubled his aching perplexity. Yes, he could not get away from it however he tried, the two distinct and separate issues were so paradoxically inter-connected that the one must neutralize the other. If he would avail himself of the one possible contingency by which he might ward off the impending horror, he must make up his mind to sacrifice all hope of his revenge—nay, he must even go so far as to hold out the hand of fellowship to the man who had twice forgotten his humanity. Volkmann set his teeth at the thought that all the minute machination, all the elaborate duplicity, which had made these last few weeks to him a long stretch of mental tight-rope walk, were to go for nothing in the face of this undreamt-for development. Ah, Nyman had been right. His sledge-hammer way would have been the best. He himself seemed likely to fail because he had demanded too much. He had refused to let de Koratoff die so that he might bask, as though it were in sunshine, in the knowledge of the other's long-drawn agony. He had let him live, and oh!—was it not too ludicrous for words?—it was the offender's threatened repetition of the offence that was to save him from punishment!

To offer de Koratoff the hand of fellowship because circumstances compelled him to give up his revenge—yes, that was the situation. He gave

himself an angry shake, as though to lift himself out of the false track in which his thoughts were running. Could he not at least be honest to himself? Had his campaign of deceit—had this wolf-in-the-sheep-skin policy of his, this ignoble hypocrisy, so warped his mind as to have lost him the capacity for telling himself the truth? No, it was quite untrue that the danger which since that morning hung over his people had caused him to renounce his revenge—he harped on the word with the savage insistence of the self-flagellant eager to draw more blood with every sweep of his whip. Oh, that glorious revenge of his, in the formulation of which he had taken so much pride, and which he had not had the courage to put into words even to himself! Not that that had saved him from having to give ear to and gauge all the vocalized foulness of it. Oh, it had sounded terrible as she voiced it that day in that dream-picture of hers which she had challenged him to interpret for her. And, terrible as a dream, what would it have been in its reality? It was impossible that he had ever fathered it—ever countenanced it—this ugly phantom which had stolen into his brain under cover of the night, and had slunk away, futile and ashamed, at the approach of dawn.

He turned from the window, through which he had been gazing at the great garden below, dazzling almost in its harmonized blaze of floral colouring, and, with a quick spasmodic movement that spoke of the overcoming of some secret disinclination, he crossed over to the portable escritoire which he had

brought with him as part of his travelling equipment. Unlocking it he drew out several neatly folded notes, from which he selected one. It was the one he had found under the door as he entered his room last night.

"A postscript to this morning," said the note. "Karol asked me this afternoon to give him a definite answer, whether I would marry him or not. I merely mention the fact to indicate that he is still honouring me with his attention, and that consequently there is still every necessity for caution."

There was nothing in the words which, on the surface of them, warranted him in giving them this careful reperusal. The baldness of style, the lack of heading and signature, gave them a dry, diary-like tone. The personal and more intimate information they conveyed counted for nothing, seeing that it merely referred to the staple point to which, as they were both aware, this correspondence owed its origin. But to Volkmann the little note pulsated with meaning. It proved to him that the thought for his safety and well-being was an ever-present one to her. It accentuated their possession of a common secret. He had been half afraid that the incongruity of their arrangement would strike her, and that, while giving it a literal adherence, she would ignore the moral drift of it. She reiterated that, but for Karol's unscrupulous jealousy, she would not—make Volkmann her diary.

He locked the note away with the rest, and took to pacing the room with great uneven steps. But

there was one thing which he could neither walk out of himself nor shut away under lock and key, the question whether Karol's egregious lie—as he had called it—was altogether a lie. It would be quite in accord with the ironic spirit of retribution of which he had spoken to the Prefect. His failure to save his people would but find a fitting counterpart in the failure of his revenge. His plan to make her love him slavishly, abjectly, would be appropriately capped by her winning his heart—a case of the arrow slaying its archer. And then he came to a sudden halt and mutely clasped his hands, staring before him with a glance outwardly blunt and blind but all the more keenly edged with inward vision.

And he saw that slowly but surely he had been getting to love Alma de Koratoff, the daughter of the man who had slain his parents. He had watched her develop from the gay, irresponsible butterfly, who had fluttered giddily about the baroness' drawing-room that afternoon when he had first seen her, into a woman who took pains to read the message of life aright, who would try to do her duty despite all her temptations to the contrary. It was in those days when she first took to holding herself aloof that he had really begun to know her. Standing at a great distance from her, and with far rarer occasions for watching, he had seen many an indication of her beautiful nature, many a proof of the depth and loftiness of her inner life which might have remained obscured to him were not his observation intensified by the very

rarity of these glimpses. And hers was to have been the hand which was to have struck the deadly blow at de Koratoff's heart, he — Volkmann shuddered—he had come near to making of her a parricide when her place should be high among the saints. . . .

He pulled himself up short with a gasp, like a man who, coming dry and parched to a well, realizes that he has drunk beyond his thirst. Volkmann felt the need of moderation, of critical temperateness. There was no wisdom in these extremes. Having started with a bottomless contempt for her, with an immeasurable sense of self-justification, he was now launching himself into hyperbolic praise, extravagant remorse. He must guard against this sudden revulsion of feelings, and not let himself get caught in the rebound. Childish as had been his first outburst of unreasoning resentment against her, more childish still would it be to yield to this hot impulse to make her reparation at all costs. To compensate her for the treason he had planned, he must take on himself the shame of a gross disloyalty to his dead parents and his living friend. Did she deserve it? Perhaps she had been paying him back all this time in his own coin. Perhaps she, too, had known how to deceive him. She belonged to a class to whom chicanery and double-dealing were the very breath of life. After all, the data which had made him go back on his original impression were of the flimsiest. What did they amount to? A humanitarian sentiment or two, a little idealism

which might or might not be counterfeit, a few copy-book maxims, and a show of commonplace self-righteousness ; these were not enough to stultify the great purpose to which he had, vain-gloriously perhaps, assigned the place of precedence in his life. He was prepared to love her, but she must give him proof, positive and clear as day, that she was worthy of being loved. He would think of some test for her ; he would puzzle at it by day and by night till he had found it. No, it would not be an easy test. Nyman, waiting patiently down by the river, his parents waiting patiently—ah, a great deal more patiently — down in the Everlasting House, should not say that he had handicapped them unduly in the race.

He turned with a start—his nerves were indeed unstrung—as a slight rustling sound came to his ears. He was just in time to see one of those neatly folded notes—he knew them well by now—being thrust through the interstice between door and floor, and to catch the echo of a light footstep hurrying away outside. He sprang forward and snatched up the missive. A glance showed him that it was not penned with her usual copper-plate regularity. Its purport, too, showed clearly that she was labouring under some great mental stress.

“I have just seen you go to your room. I should like to speak to you at once. Am waiting in the garden-house.”

He allowed her a few minutes' start, and came upon her seated in the appointed meeting-place and

bending over a piece of embroidery. But her heightened colour and the restless brilliancy of her eyes, as she lifted them expectantly at his approach, were evidently not the result of pure enthusiasm for her work.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," she said, rising. And then, without giving him time for a possible commonplace in reply, she continued: "I hope you won't think me troublesome, Mr. Volkmann, but I should like you to do me a service. Will you?"

"Of course,—if it is in my power."

"I am almost sure it is. It concerns a financial transaction. I suppose you know how to deal with stocks and shares and things of that sort?"

He looked at her in surprise as he asked—

"Do you wish me to make any investments for you?"

"I don't quite understand what that means," she replied, "but I don't think it's that I want you to do. Let me tell you. The fact is that I have need of money, as much money as I can get—thousands of roubles. Now, I haven't a copeck of my own, but I have a paper which my grandmother left me in her will, and which is supposed to be worth ever so much."

"And which you now want me to realize for you."

"Yes, I suppose that's what you call it. Look, here it is. I have brought it with me. Send it to the bank, and ask them to let me have the money

for it as soon as ever they can. Yes, here we are."

She drew it out, after some little fumbling in her work-basket, and held it out to him. He took the paper, but retained it in his hand without unfolding it. He felt as though he were slowly petrifying. For the nonce he had become incapable of the simplest mechanical action. This was too wonderful. Only a few minutes ago he had clamoured for a proof that she was worthy of being loved, had whipped himself into a frenzied determination to ransack earth and heaven for a sufficiently strenuous test, and here she had proffered it to him of her own accord, test and triumph all in one. Visible, palpable, he held it in his hands. His arm fell limply to his side.

She had seen the change in his manner, and drew back from him in open alarm.

"Oh, what is it—have I done anything wrong?" she cried.

"No, nothing wrong that I know of," he replied slowly, feeling that his voice needed careful balancing. "But you will pardon me if I say that, as your agent in this matter, I am entitled to know the use to which you wish to put this money."

"And you will pardon me, Mr. Volkmann, if I prefer to keep it a secret—at least, for the present," she rejoined, with spirit, reminding him of their earlier fencing-bouts. "All I am inclined to tell you is that there is nothing in it of which you or I need be ashamed."

"I am perfectly sure of that, because, whether you wish it or not, I happen to know the object for which you require the money."

"Do you?" she asked, provocatively incredulous.

"Yes. It is intended for the unfortunate peasants who yesterday came to your father for help."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with genuine disappointment.

"But I am right—am I not?" he insisted.

Her disappointment gave way to a sudden wonder. Had she no inkling that it was she herself who had put that ring of exultation into his voice, that transfigured look into his eyes? She shook her head in token of her perplexity, and then drew herself erect.

"Yes, Mr. Volkmann, it is as you say. But I don't want anybody else to know, till the whole thing is done."

"Our second secret."

The words slipped from him unawares. She ignored them but for the flush that sprang to her cheeks.

"You see, they might put difficulties in my way," she went on rapidly; "they might call me quixotic and extravagant. But I don't see why they should. The money is mine, absolutely mine. It is supposed to be my dowry, should any one be so foolish as to marry me," she added, the flush coming back. "Oh, but if I had millions I should give them, sooner than have the faces of those miserable creatures to haunt me. All day yesterday I went

about puzzling and pondering, and this morning I started again, and then, just about half an hour ago, it suddenly came to me. I thought of this paper, and I thought of you as the only one likely to help me through with it without discouraging me. Of course, papa will do his best for them, but he does not seem very sanguine about it; and, in any case, with the correspondence to and fro, it would probably come too late, even if they do send anything from St. Petersburg. And, besides, they need not take it as a gift. They can pay it back to me when things go better with them."

Volkman held his breath lest he should cry aloud. For a brief while, shutting off the joyless desert of the past behind him, and in front of him the perhaps still more arid desert of the future, he would luxuriate in this bright little oasis of the moment, feed on its ambrosia and drink its nectar. For a brief while he would oust from his mind all the dark associations that should cling to her, all the bitter memories she should awaken in him, the ignominious vanity of his ambush against her, Nyman, his parents, the oath which held him in bondage—he would shake himself free of everything, for he had found a perfect woman, and such a one justified any living man in lifting himself beyond his mortal obligations. For a brief while he would revel in the empyrean, and then let whatever power there was dash him to earth again.

She grew uneasy at his silence.

"Do you also disapprove?" she asked timidly.

"I—I don't know what to say," he prevaricated, merely to gain more time for putting in order all he had to say.

"I ought not to have bothered you," she cried impulsively, utterly mistaking his hesitation. "I had an idea that as you hurried past me before without seeing me, you looked greatly troubled. Perhaps you yourself want help of some sort—oh, won't you tell me?"

"You have helped already," he replied, dwelling deliberately on each word.

Her eyes flashed brightly, perhaps with a suspicion of moisture in them.

"Now you are mocking me!" she exclaimed hotly. "Please give me back that paper. I shall see to it myself."

With a quiet smile he moved out of her reach. Yes, that paper, that epoch-making document—he had not even paid it the courtesy of looking at it. He must make good that omission at once. Was it not the text on which he would build all he was going to say? Slowly he unfolded it—threw a cursory glance over it. Then he looked again; the look became a fixed stare. Then, finally, his eyes remained glued upon it.

"Is there anything wrong with it?" she asked, noting his strange manner.

"When did you see this paper last?" he counter-questioned her brusquely.

"I have never really seen it properly," she answered obediently. "It has been lying in my

casket for years, together with my other few valuables. I have never even troubled to read it through."

Volkmann battled down his anger. What could strangers expect from this man who did not scruple to rob even his own child? The document he held was no share certificate, but an intimation of their sale in the market from a Moscow broker. Whether by accident or design, the arrangement of words and figures probably resembled the original, and the thief had replaced it in the casket, trusting to the similarity of its appearance to deceive its unsophisticated owner. It seemed he need not even have gone to that small precaution. The truth trusts every one. Or, perhaps, by some quaint perversion of thought, that was how de Koratoff had meant to salve his warped conscience. It was not worth while discussing what it was he had meant. Volkmann looked up and met her gaze.

"Mr. Volkmann, why this mystery?" she said, half pleading, half angry. "Let me know the truth at once."

"Well, then, I have to tell you——"

Then he stopped short. No, he was going to do a foolish thing. She should not know it from him—she should not remember that it was from him that she had received the first hint of her father's unworthiness.

"I am afraid your magnanimous deed will have to confine itself to the mere will."

"Why?" she asked harshly.

"Because these shares are worthless. They

would not fetch a hundred copecks. They refer to a platinum mine in the Urals which for years has been as exhausted as a dead volcano."

"Ah, that is why papa has left off teasing me about being an heiress," she said, as though to herself. "But, oh, Mr. Volkmann, are you quite sure about it?"

"Unfortunately, I am only too sure. It is only a little while ago that I had to embody the statement in a departmental report I was asked to draw up."

Her disappointment was pitiful. It stirred him infinitely more than he had been stirred by the gladness and goodwill of her giving. It made him forget that he was back once more on the horns of his dilemma, the confrontation with de Koratoff's murderous designs which had seemed on the point of receiving so sudden and so miraculous a diversion. He thought only of the perfect woman he had found.

"I don't care a jot for myself," she murmured, "but the thought of that old man of seventy-three panting behind the plough along the furrows. . . . Oh, Mr. Volkmann, I do feel so small and ridiculous. All those high-flying plans of mine fluttering to the ground like pricked bladders—I trying to play Lady Bountiful on an empty purse—oh, please do laugh at me!"

"Laugh at you!" he cried passionately, the iron bonds of his control breaking with a sudden snap. "Since when have I given you the impression of being a man to make a laughing-stock of the

sanctities of life, to jeer at the rare touches of softness and sweetness one comes across in this hard, bitter world? I would weep with you, openly, with every rascal on earth looking on and gibing at me, if that would right a thousandth part of the wrong. What would I care, as long as you understood me, as long as you knew that it is not unmanliness in a man to be frank in his grief, there where he is strong and frank enough to admit his failure. Alma"—he saw her flush and tremble, and he knew it was because this was the first time he had called her by that name—"this seems a day of failures. We both have tinkered with helpless hands at this one and the same thing. I myself have another failure, one you shall never know of, to my credit. And yet, boldly, presumptuously, I wish to compensate myself for my failures with the greatest possible of all my successes. The greatest possible," he iterated, "you—Alma!"

"I—I did not give you the right to say that to me," she faltered, catching blindly at the first words that offered.

"No, I took it. If you had given it, it would no longer have been a right but a concession. And I know, Alma, that I have a right to ask you for yourself. You owe yourself to me. Don't ask me what I mean. But it is fitting that at the hands of one who robbed me and made me poor, I should receive the greatest treasure it is in his power to give."

"Oh, what are you saying?" she broke in on him,

trembling. "I am not to ask you what you mean, and yet there is a world of hidden significance in your words; you leave me to a hundred wild surmises—no, not to a hundred but, what is worse, to only one. Oh, you are making me afraid—afraid!"

"That is as it should be, Alma," he replied, pitching his passion to a lower yet more ardent key, "that is as it should be. Love is the greatest fear of all. It is the dread, the shrinking cowardice lest the loved one should not be something more than human, should fall short of the consummate excellence which is God's alone. You began by fearing me, and that, I know now, was the beginning of your love. Oh, Alma, it was love, it is love, is it not?"

"It is, Boris," she answered simply, frankly.

The paradisiac morning grew roseate with a second dawn. The great garden breathed forth a myriad new ecstasies. They stood looking at one another, waiting for some vague initiative, two pillars of palpitating stone preparing themselves for their second and final birth into life. All they still needed was a silent sign, a dumb mutual call to achieve their outward oneness as they had achieved their inward fusion. Slowly Volkmann lifted both his hands towards her, slowly she lifted hers to meet them in response. But just then, upon the very point of their tingling touch, a nerve-shattering dissonance crashed on their ears. A raucous yelp rang out, and the next instant a huge bloodhound, a

magnificent specimen of its kind, came bounding into view.

"Oh, it's Krax," said Alma, with a pout of disappointment at the anti-climax.

The splendid animal came to a dead halt, and then, fawning and hoarsely whimpering with joy, ambled with a luxurious leisureliness towards his young mistress. On the threshold of the summer-house he lay down with a snort of content, wagging an obedient tail.

"He is not the real intruder," Alma continued, turning to Volkmann with a smile and a deep breath that might have been a sigh.

He nodded. He was quite aware that the herculean hound was never left to range at large by himself. With a look of mute understanding between them she settled herself in one of the wickerwork chairs, while Volkmann posed with negligently folded arms against the doorway. They had silently agreed to this simple bit of stage-managing for the benefit of the real intruder.

A moment later Karol appeared round the bend of the hedge-skirted pathway. The laugh, with which he covered the remaining distance to the summer-house, sounded almost genuine.

"Oho, that's what you've been dragging me this way for, you knowing beggar," he addressed the complacent Krax. Then, taking a long, quick stride, he entered and flung himself into a seat with a deliberation which showed that he had no intention of being dislodged from it very speedily.

"Now that's what I call cosy, Cousin Alma," he said more soberly. "But then you always were a good sort, Cousin Alma, always ready to share the good things of life with some one else. Do you think your good nature could divide itself into three?"

"You are welcome to your share of the garden-house, if that is what you mean," she replied, looking straight at him; "in fact, you are welcome to the whole of it, unless Mr. Volkmann wishes to keep you company. I am going back into the house."

"Then I'm with you, Cousin Alma," he said, springing up instantly, as though nothing in the world could ruffle him. "By the way, though, Cousin Alma"—and he pointed carelessly to her embroidery which lay disregarded on the table—"while you were discussing metaphysics—or what?—with our friend Volkmann, haven't you been rather forgetful of poor old Saint Anastasius? At this rate he won't get his coat done for years, and he'll have to shiver through another winter in that disgraceful patched-up old cassock of his. Although, speaking of shivering, it doesn't seem such an unpleasant thing after all," he laughed, with a copious mopping of his forehead. "Let's see, Volkmann, who's your patron saint? If you ask Cousin Alma nicely, you would perhaps get her to work a coat for him as well."

Volkmann brushed aside his insolence and clumsy sarcasms. He was handling heroic issues which he must not desecrate by association with this reptile's

pettinesses. Karol's hectic gaiety, his ill-concealed jealousy and malevolence played but a small part in Volkmann's great scheme of co-ordinating the benign and adverse influences that were respectively his assets and liabilities. And yet, now that every, even the smallest, manifestation was becoming of moment, he could not help observing—and he fancied that Alma did the same—a vague secondary feeling that permeated Karol's behaviour. He seemed possessed of a latent disquietude and distraction of manner. He plunged into desultory talk which did not wait for replies, or ignored them when they came, and converted the conversation most of the way back into a disjointed monologue for him. Every now and then his hands made spasmodic movements towards his pockets, and his eyes ran with shifting, but keen, scrutiny along the ground they traversed. Once he stooped to pick up a scrap of paper, but only to toss it away again with a gesture of annoyance. And all the while his tongue was running loose.

Alma herself was pleased and grateful that Karol for once did not seek to make a definite claim on her interest. She was busy enough with her own thoughts. They made pleasant music to her as she walked, and the gravelled footway flowered into roses at every step. She had scarcely even noticed that a dark slur had fallen across the sacramental hour of their love's apocalypse, and that the slur might lend itself to a sinister significance. She would have seen no shadows in the deepest night.

The great revelation had swept away with avalanche-like force all doubts and all misgivings, had effaced all anxious retrospect and the manifold solitudes of the past. If anything, they were to her, taking her deduction from Volkmann's aphorism, a source of infinite joy ; she was glad she had feared him so greatly, or else her love would perhaps not have grown so strong.

When they had come to the bottom of the verandah staircase, she had recovered something of her workaday mood. Ready and self-possessed, she detached herself from her companions, giving Krax a parting pat and dividing a smiling nod impartially between the two men. Karol watched her mount the winding iron stairs with the blank air of one who has seen great events taking shape before his very eyes and did not know it till too late.

"A disagreeable thing has happened to me," he said, turning to Volkmann with an abrupt change from his former manner.

"I'm sorry. What is it, Cousin Karol ?" Volkmann asked absently.

"I'm not your Cousin Karol—yet," snarled the other, putting a vicious stress on the final monosyllable.

"I beg your pardon," said Volkmann, suddenly alert. "I have heard you called that so often that unconsciously—— I address my question to Captain Larmorin."

"Oho, you needn't take a fellow up so sharply ; you know I didn't mean anything," said Karol,

convinced that Volkmann knew quite well what he had meant. "I'm a little put out this morning. You don't happen to have noticed a letter with a French postmark knocking about anywhere?"

"Not that I remember," said Volkmann.

"Well, that's the letter I have lost. I shouldn't like anybody to read it. That's what I brought Krax out with me for," he explained, nodding sapiently to give additional point to the explanation.

"Yes, quite so," remarked Volkmann.

"Now, if that wasn't a clever idea, I should like to know what is," continued Karol, swelling visibly with self-complacency. "You see, the letter had been in my pocket for a couple of days, and I know the wonderful things these beasts can do with their nose. So I made him smell my jacket, showed him an envelope, and off we went. What an idea, though, eh, man? I wonder what the regiment will say to it when they hear. D'you know, Volkmann, the colonel is always telling me I'm too good for the line. He says I ought to go on the staff. I'd make my mark in the Intelligence Department in no time."

"I have no doubt of that," said Volkmann, dryly.

"But fancy my coming on the two of you right down there in the summer-house. I suppose it wouldn't be discreet to ask what you had to tell each other so particularly, eh?"

"It would be most indiscreet—unless I had your cousin's permission to tell you."

"I thought so. Thank God, I'm not inquisitive. By the way, has that Jewish seamstress said anything to you?"

"Nothing of importance."

"I mean, she hasn't been setting her cap at you, in a sort of way, eh?"

"I haven't noticed it."

"You haven't? A grand girl, Volkmann, ah, a grand girl. Just have a proper look at her next time. Well, I'm afraid I'm not very good company at present. I must do something to relieve my feelings. I'll put Krax back into his kennel, and then go down to the village and kick the first Jew I meet into the middle of next week."

Karol's last words seared Volkmann's brain like a tongue of flame. He was awake once more, stung out of the trance of false security in which he had been lapped by the opiate of his love. Love—but what about the stern work that was waiting to be done? Yes, he had come crashing to the ground much sooner and much harder than he had expected. He had forgotten that the Karols were getting ready to hound the yapping wolves on to their all too easy prey. And what about himself? Was he not worse, he the accessory before the fact? Something must happen, something must be done. Where was Nyman all this time? Lolling among the reeds on the river-bank, feeding his philosophic cynicism on extracts from Horace. A wave of anger against his friend swept over him. Nyman must help. This was Nyman's business as much as his own.

Yes, most of it, if not all. One portion he must retain all for himself. It was how, having found a perfect woman, he should set about to retain her. No, he must be reasonable—he could surely not expect Nyman to suggest a way for that.

CHAPTER XVII

A NUMBER of little happenings in the course of the day combined to prevent Volkmann from making his way down to the river till some time after the conclusion of the evening meal. The interval had done nothing to lessen the vehemence of his new-born resentment against Nyman. If anything it had increased its magnitude. It gave him an opportunity of reiterating to himself time after time that it was Nyman who had forced him into this predicament. Had not Nyman admitted that he had his own axe to grind against de Koratoff, and that it was to gain a cat's paw that he had worked on Volkmann's feelings by letting him into the secret of his parents' miserable fate? And he had come very near to succeeding. The insidious speciousness of his representations had almost betrayed Volkmann into committing a wrong that was far greater than the measure of retribution to which either human or Divine justice would consider him entitled. And all the while Nyman, the cunning instigator, no doubt sat rubbing his hands in gleeful anticipation, complacently confident that he was about to enjoy the ripe fruit which he had set another to toil for in the noonday heat. But he was mistaken. Nyman

should know that one man's knavery did not mean another man's folly.

Volkmann had come to the bend of the road where the turbulent, leaden-hued expanse of the river leapt to his gaze. At the same time there struck upon his ears the sound of a reed-whistle, thin and fretful like the wail of a sick child. For a moment he thought it was some mujik shepherd who, having no more sheep to tend, was thus lulling himself back into make-believe memories of his vanished flock. But a few steps further he discovered that the player was no other than Nyman. With a quick gulp in his throat, Volkmann stood still. In a flash his mental vision had travelled back through the endless centuries, and he saw himself, not here on the Dnieper, but on the banks of the immemorial Euphrates, where his captive ancestors had sat lamenting the shattered glories of their God's great citadel. And here the same scene was enacting itself, with Nyman as the mournful protagonist, a latter-day replica of a broken minstrel claiming for himself the rightful legacy of his forbears, the consolation of tears. Volkmann stood listening for a little while, but he could discover here no complacent glee, no eager vindictive anticipation; nothing but the echoes of a sorrow-dim retrospect, nothing but the dirge of might-have-beens and of memories fraught with heartache. In an agony of remorse, he sprang forward and bent down to place both his hands on the other's shoulders. There was in the action the impulse of

an over-welling affection, but it also held, and in perhaps greater degree, the vague shamefaced suggestion of an improvised benediction. Ah, what right had he, the apostate, to bless one of the People?

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Nyman, looking up unmoved.

"I come late," was the reply. "I suppose you had given up hopes of me."

"No man ever comes too late for me," said Nyman, vaguely.

"Still, you knew I would come. You had my word for it. I was to report progress."

Negligently, Nyman turned his head. He did not seem to have grasped the other's meaning.

"Well, what has happened?" he asked.

"Nothing, Nyman. I am sorry, but I have nothing to tell you," replied Volkmann.

"It doesn't matter. Take more time—I didn't stint you for time, Baruch, did I?"

Volkmann had sat down on a neighbouring knoll, and was staring stubbornly at the ground. The hot wave of indignation against Nyman, which had tossed him hither and thither all day, had obliterated from his mind the fear of the avowal he had to make him. But the wave had subsided, and he realized, with a sudden shrinking, that here and now was the momentous hour when he must come to a reckoning with Nyman and acknowledge that he had fallen miserably short. The curious pliancy of Nyman's mood was a strange element which only

made the situation more formidable. But come what may, Nyman must know—so why not at once? Volkmann's voice and manner, in which he addressed the other man, was a queer blending of defiance and deference.

"There's no use in my taking more time for it, Nyman. I have taken all the time I want. My plan has miscarried."

"Miscarried—why?"

"Because I love her," replied Volkmann, gaining firmness now that he had taken the plunge.

"You love her—whom?"

"Alma,—de Koratoff's daughter."

"What, the pink-and-white thing?" asked Nyman, with a tinge of contempt.

"Call her what you like. I love her."

Nyman shook his head plaintively.

"I see what it is, Baruch. I never talk to any one, and my brain is becoming clogged with all the things I want to say and can't find a listener for. You must talk to me plainly, as to a child."

"I can't put it to you more plainly," said Volkmann, his breath coming hard. "I had a plan—I told you I had a plan. But it could only work on the condition that I hated her. Instead of which I have come to love her."

Nyman's harsh guttural laugh broke the still air.

"And a fine, statesmanlike plan it must have been which comes to wreck over the coquettings of a doll."

He saw Volkmann wince, and went on in seeming contrition—

“No, Baruch, forget what I said. It was a foolish and cruel thing to say. One can’t help falling in love, even if one knows that a whole world of mischief will come of it—eh, Baruch? No, no, don’t distress yourself about your plan. If it failed the fault is not yours. It is mine—all mine. You couldn’t have expected anything else. I was your partner in this business, and therefore it couldn’t have gone right, not in a thousand years. I am accursed, and the curse of failure follows all those who associate with me. You have nothing to reproach yourself for. The failure is mine—let the chagrin of it be mine as well.”

“You are very good to me, Nyman,” said Volkmann, humbly.

Now that the danger was over, it came home to him, with the force of a blow, how great it had been. But it was over. Nyman was content, Nyman had acquiesced. He had not even insisted on the adoption of an alternative plan. De Koratoff’s ordeal was past. And yet, Volkmann would have preferred if Nyman had not shown himself quite so uncannily tractable.

“I mean what I say, Baruch,” Nyman continued, fierce and withal reassuring. “Let the chagrin be all mine. I have plenty of room for it—you haven’t. You are too full of de Koratoff’s daughter. But I—my heart, I tell you, is the biggest in all the world. My heart, I would have you know, is that

wide, great river there, and if you come across any one else who has suffered a set-back, a disappointment, an unhealable hurt, tell them to come to me and make me their repository. I have plenty of room and to spare for all."

"Nyman," cried Volkmann, stepping close up to him, "you must not give way like this. I won't have it. Things are not yet so bad that you should let yourself fall to pieces like a moth-eaten rag."

"Falling to pieces, giving way—is that what you call it when a man wants to test his strength and see how much he can bear? You don't know what you are talking about, Baruch. You may be glad to hear that I have changed my whole view of life. I used to look on every new day as a fresh blow to crush me closer to earth. I found that wouldn't do. It softened my muscle, and the people in the ferry swore at me for not getting them across quick enough. Then, in the reaction, I became a Titan. Every stroke I determined should bring out my power of resistance. Oh, and now, how I pity you weaklings whose sinews are melting like wax in the smile of fortune. Baruch, it only needs another catastrophe or two to make me the strongest man that ever lived."

"You may prepare yourself for one at least," said Volkmann, seizing the turn Nyman had afforded him.

"Really? That's good news. You are still a friend to me, Baruch. Come, what is it?"

"It is de Koratoff's hand again. There is to

be a repetition of last winter's work, only this time it is to be more thorough. The mujiks are to be allowed to cool their blood and fill their pockets at leisure. There will be no interference."

"Ah, I thought it meant mischief!" exclaimed Nyman.

"What meant mischief?"

"He is going across to-morrow. He sent me a message an hour ago to hold myself in readiness for him all the morning."

"What, so soon?" Volkmann cried aghast.

"So soon?" Nyman echoed scornfully. "Aren't you rather surprised that he has waited so long? Why, it's eight months since that last little affair. He's a sportsman, is de Koratoff. He gave us time to revive before felling us again. There's no fun in slaying dead men."

Volkmann prefaced the rush of his words with a low cry.

"Nyman, I implore you, give your mind, your heart to this. I have come here in all honesty and sincerity of purpose to consult with you what is to be done in this terrible business. Let us be calm and sensible. Nothing is lost yet. We have the information upon which to go—de Koratoff does not dream that it can possibly leak out, and that surely should be worth something. Only let us use it carefully. We must not let it spread. If our enemy sees that his intended victims have taken warning, he will fling himself upon them with the double fury of the wild beast which beholds its prey

escaping its murderous grip. But, Nyman, there surely must be a few resolute, level-headed men in this community whom we could take into our confidence. Something should, and will, come of our united wisdom. Bring them to me, Nyman. I am willing to put myself at their disposal with all my heart and soul. They can command me—I am prepared to share with them every labour and every peril. If they refuse to come to me, take me to them. But let us do something, Nyman.”

Nyman remained silent, with a pondering air, as though he were allowing the other's words to sink into his mind one by one. Then he shook his head decisively.

“There may be these resolute men you speak of,” he said at last, “but with all their resolution and wisdom the only thing they can answer you is, that they themselves are ready to die if that will mean the saving of their wives and little ones. That will be all they have to offer you, and that does not amount to much, does it? No, no; you have nothing at all to expect from us. All that can and is to be done must come from you. And rightly it should come from you,” he flared up, his brows knitting themselves thunderously as he struck the fist of one hand into the palm of the other. “It is the return you owe us for what you have received at our hands. You have taken the genius, which is yours through the spirit of our race, and have transferred it to the service of our enemies. It was our

property to begin with. Let us have at least a portion of what is rightfully our own."

Volkmann turned to him eagerly.

"You are right in that, Nyman," he said, pitifully anxious to conciliate the other, "I have also thought so—I am not taking your words for the idle compliment they may be. It should be left with me to save them, and I do not shirk the responsibility. This morning, after I first heard of the danger and had set to racking my brains how best to combat it, there suggested itself to me a way, a doubtful, desperate way, which could be made the road to safety. And from this, Nyman, you shall see how true, despite everything, my heart beats for my people, for this way of mine would mean the most terrible thing that could ever happen to me."

"What would it mean?" Nyman asked stonily.

"That I should call de Koratoff 'father.'"

"Call him what?" shouted Nyman.

"Hush—wait till you have heard me," Volkmann went on hastily. "I love his daughter, and his daughter loves me."

"Oh, she loves you in return, does she?"

Nyman lingered over the words, as if to give himself time to take in a new aspect which his own question had opened up for him. Volkmann noted, but could make nothing of it.

"Yes, she loves me," he repeated. "She loved me, I think, from the moment almost when we first met. It was on this that I was first led to base my plan of vengeance."

"Oh yes, that brilliant plan of yours—when shall I hear the last of it?" cried Nyman.

"I asked you to give me a hearing," said Volkmann, bearing up hardily against the taunt. "This is what I thought of doing, Nyman. Loving me as she does, I could easily get her to join her entreaties to mine—and there is no one who can do more with him than she. She would assure him that her heart will break if he does not consent to our marriage. And then it would be my turn. I would swear to him that this his only child should have a life which the angels would envy. I would tell him that I do not require a copeck of his daughter's dowry which he has gambled away; the threat would weigh with him, for that he is a coward I am sure. All that I ask of him is to leave the people of my race in peace, and not to make my sleep haunted by the moans of dying children. This, Nyman, I can do, and no more."

There was a brief silence, and then Nyman leapt up with a shout.

"You clumsy word-juggler, you miserable hypocrite," he cried between set teeth, "do you really think me such a clod that I can't see through all this? Make no mistake, my friend, in whatever of your contemptible doings you may have hoodwinked the blind dullard Nyman, this, at any rate, is clear as crystal to him. I can quite see that some warp in your mind, some superstitious twist perhaps, makes it seem good to you to turn the pursuit of your despicable desires into an act of self-sacrifice, a

means of self-glorification. But don't expect to make me a party to that—I have not yet fallen so low. Marry her, if you like; marry your pink-and-white abomination, but don't make our martyrdom your impious excuse for it. Oh, I quite believe there's some truth in what you say. Hidden though you may be in the very heart of Amalek's house, your conscience has tracked you down. It is quite possible that you may be haunted by the selfish fear of having your sleep disturbed by the cries of murdered children. All this may be true. But one thing is equally true: I would sooner die inch by inch than that the saving of our lives should bring peace and palliation to your renegade heart."

Volkman had risen to his feet long before the end, and had listened, drawing himself tauter with every word. His voice, too, rang metallically rigid as he said—

"You did not mind my hiding in the house of Amalek as long as you thought it suited your purpose."

"I didn't know then that you had it in you to be a double traitor—a traitor to them as well as to us," Nyman flung back at him.

"That is a quibble, Nyman. Since when have you taken to fighting our enemies' battles?"

"Since you have proved yourself unworthy of fighting ours."

"Remember I do not require to ask your permission for that."

"Remember we shall accept no favours from—
one like you."

"One like me!" echoed Volkmann, with an audible gasp. "Nyman, is that the last word on our friendship?"

"The last, as far as I am concerned. But one of these days, perhaps, your conscience will speak the epilogue."

CHAPTER XVIII

NYMAN was not surprised that his remark should evoke no reply, and that, on looking round presently, he should find himself alone. The soft turf had concealed all sound of Volkmann's departure, but a thudding sensation in his brain made Nyman think of footsteps taking a dogged, undeviating path into the relentless far-away.

With closed eyes Nyman felt his way back to his tree-stump. As he seated himself a sudden access of loneliness came upon him with a sharp gust that chilled the tepid evening air into wintry presages. So he sat for a while, shrinking deeper and deeper into himself, in obedience to an unconscious desire to touch bottom, to rest the floating disquietude of his soul on a solid foundation. The deeper he went, the nearer he might approach to some undreamt-of new self to be company for the old. The sense of gregariousness, the instinct for fellow-contact, had burst out into a mighty passion, an overwhelming mania.

He knew why that was so. He was alone now, quite, quite alone. He had driven away from him the one friend he had, the only being whose heart responded to his own with an answering thrill.

Yes, that was what he had done—he had wantonly thrust from him his friend Baruch, his erstwhile more-than-brother Baruch. The long years through which they had starved together with hunger and cold had counted for nothing. They had not stood their ground; they had been swept away by the onrush of furious, of uncontrollable jealousy in the moment when he had learnt that Baruch not only loved but was beloved in turn. A strange gladness, foolish, uncharitable, putting him inwardly to the blush, had uplifted him when Baruch had first told him of his attachment to de Koratoff's daughter. At last, he thought, he had found a companion sufferer, he no longer stood by himself in the humiliating uniqueness of his heart's great agony. He had found a malicious, unbrotherly comfort in the thought that he and Baruch had now become most truly akin by the levelling bond of pain. And then he had learnt that, unlike his own, Baruch's love was requited. As in all other things, Baruch had again outdistanced him, and left him hopelessly his inferior. Never before had he appeared to Nyman so truly a king among men, so signally crowned with supremacy. And, by the contrast, Nyman had never before appeared to himself so lowly a worm, so basely outcast and rejected. And from a motive of such paltriness he had lost his friend Baruch—perhaps in a last despairing burst of tawdry pride to make himself think he was not so poor, but that he had something still to lose. And now that he had really nothing more to lose. . . . Lower and lower

his head drooped into the horny palms of his outspread hands. And presently, despite his tightly closed lids, he felt the hot tears trickle upon his cheeks. He did not try to check his tears—he was not ashamed of them. Even the “strongest man that ever lived” might weep just once for having crushed his heart between the millstones of his strength.

For a few minutes he allowed his grief free vent. An involuntary process of reasoning told him that anything else would be false economy. Best have it over and be done with it. And now he was ready again for the business of the world. In a cold, practical way he told himself that people could no more help loving Baruch than they could help being repelled by his own unloveliness. In forgetting that he had done himself a great wrong, he had done Baruch a far greater. Everything had become very simple. The only point at issue now was to set himself right with Baruch, to make him all the reparation he could—a reparation at least as great as the insult he had hurled at him. Above all, Baruch should marry the woman he loved, not as a secondary consideration, not to conciliate de Koratoff’s implacable hatred, but as a victory in the great cause of love, a triumph of steadfast hearts that had battled for and won each other. Some such victories there must be, if only to buoy up the drowning optimism of the world. Nyman would see to that. Besides being the strongest man, he would become the greatest moralist that ever lived. But, as is usual in

every case where a moral is pointed, somebody must suffer first. And who so fitting to provide the text as de Koratoff himself? There was every reason that he should. De Koratoff summed up in his puny self three mighty incentives—Baruch's love, Nyman's revenge, and, chiefest of all, the danger he portended to their people. De Koratoff would not be a pigmy but a miracle if he were strong enough to bar the way to this avalanche of motive.

With coolness and deliberation, without a shadow of flurry or confusion, Nyman pursued the tenor of his thoughts, convinced that in the long run they would bring him unfailingly to his goal. And when, an hour later, he rose, there was about him an air and feeling of finality which made him appear to himself the spirit incarnate of inevitable issues. But even that was not yet enough for him. A rabid eagerness had overtaken him to clinch the chain of his resolve up to the very last link. That last link was Malka. He would see her just once more, not to convince himself that he had made no mistake—had he not convinced himself of that long ago?—but simply to give himself the additional impetus that would carry him, with bird-like ease, across the gulf that divided the humanly possible from the everlastingly irretrievable. Yes, he would go and see Malka once more. After that everything would be possible—and impossible.

He knew he would find her at her lodgings, where she was back these three or four days after completing the work she had had in hand for

Madame de Koratoff. He had seen the light in her room on each of the last few evenings as, at a discreet distance, he prowled round the house, his gaze glued upon her window. She never came down to join the gossiping groups at the door. With brief interruptions he saw the monotonous swing of her arm, as she guided the needle through her work, reproduced in shadow upon the ceiling. Every now and then he saw the glossy surface of her hair and a narrow streak of white brow lifted above the low window-sill. And once he had seen her leap to her feet and chase herself up and down the room like a mad thing in a paroxysm of unrest. That was the mood in which she was most familiar to him. He knew better than any one else that in that lithe languorous body of hers there slept volcanic fires, for he bore upon his heart many a mark of her searing touch. Poor, poor Malka—she had not yet learnt the wisdom of patience, the joy of self-annihilation. Still stubborn, still rebellious, as if in ignorance that each fresh throb of revolt only roused her malignant fate to a louder burst of laughter. Still, was there much to choose between being laughed at and being wept over?

He swung down the street with a long, manful stride as befitted one who came on a high errand. A group of chattering women, crowding round the threshold, hushed at his approach and drew away before him, as at an apparition, to let him pass. One or two towzled youngsters clutched at hanging apron-strings and set up a howl. Nyman

smiled, but vouchsafed them neither look nor word. He knew long ago that the mothers of the place used his name as a bogey to frighten their children with. He fumbled his way up the rickety stairs, the smile still on his face, but now faintly tinged with malice at the thought of the sarcasm he had ready for her.

"I told you never to come here," was her greeting to him as he entered.

"I should not have come, but for a particular reason," he answered, still smiling. "I have a question to ask you."

She looked at him, angry and suspicious.

"Well, then, ask your question," she snapped.

"I want to know whether you have already saved up your railway fare to follow Baruch back to Odessa when he goes there."

"Why?"

Her anger would not allow her to say more.

"Because it may make a difference to you to know that when he does go back he will probably be accompanied by his wife."

"His wife? Liar—abominable liar!"

Nyman shrugged his shoulders complacently.

"I should hardly tell you a lie which you could disprove with so little trouble, should I? Unless, of course, Baruch wished to play a joke on me when he came to tell me this evening that he intended to marry de Koratoff's daughter—the girl with the saucer eyes, you know. Not that I altogether admire his taste, do you?"

She had fallen back, and could only murmur faintly—

“Mademoiselle Alma!”

“Well, does it perhaps seem more plausible to you now?”

A spasm of love, pity, and remorse shot through him as he saw her there writhing in her silent agony. A wild but only momentary impulse gripped him to throw himself before her on his knees and implore her forgiveness. But that was just the thing he must not do. That would spoil everything. He must play his part.

She took no pains to conceal from him the efficacy of the blow he had dealt her, but it was not long before the adamantine obstinacy of her nature reasserted itself. Her sinuous frame slowly drew itself up to its full height, her bloodless face more ghostly against the dark masses of her hair. Nyman thought of Medusa. As at the sight of the fabled monster, he felt himself turning to stone. Never had it seemed possible to him that the terrible and the beautiful could so commingle into a perfect whole.

“Why have you come to tell me this?” she asked, breaking the silence at last.

“Well, is it not interesting news?”

“If you will not say it, then you shall hear it from me,” she proceeded, with the quiescent intensity of white heat. “In the first place, you came to satiate your heart of a dog with the spectacle of my pain, and that satisfaction you have had. In the second place, you thought to catch my disappointment,

my bitter torment at the flood, and turn it to what advantage you could for yourself."

Nyman felt the blood beginning to flow again in his veins, and smiled once more in the fulness of his content. Yes, she was working finely towards his ends. Things were going well for him. He waited for her to resume.

"And now I shall tell you something which you had perhaps not bargained for," she continued, gathering in fierceness with every word. "I have always hated you, loathed you with all the strength, all the volume of my soul. Whenever I saw your face, whenever I heard your voice, I shrank as from an unspeakable horror. Every friendly word I gave you, every smile I had to bring to my lips for you, was an effort at which my heart revolted and sickened."

"Go on, Malka, go on!" he exclaimed exultantly.

"Oh, I will go on," and her voice rose to a cry. "Not if you died for me a thousand times would you make good to me your great wrong in robbing me of my Baruch. Yes, it was you who robbed me of him, who enticed him away from me. But for you he would never have left his home, and as the years went by, I should either have gone to the grave or forced him to love me. Instead, through you, I had to sit here helplessly, fool that I was, hoping and praying for him, and thinking that by the magic of my own changelessness I would keep him too from changing. And every moment I stole from the prayers I prayed for him, I devoted to hating

you. I have hated you as far as my memory can go back."

"Have you really, Malka? That's good!" he exclaimed almost joyfully.

"You shall have still better, my friend. I could have strangled you with my childish fingers even in those days when the three of us sat all together on the river-bank—you ogling me sideways with your stupid fish-eyes, and he, Baruch, chewing the grass-blades, with his back to me as he lay listening open-eared to your interminable chatter. And always and always, with but one or two precious intervals, you kept thrusting yourself between us, sticking your ground like a limpet, while my fingers were itching all the time to grab at you and root you up and fling you far, far away from us, out of sight, out of hearing, and leave him and me alone in the great solitude around us which, vast as it was, was still not vast enough to contain my love——"

She stopped short, for the rush of her words had carried her beyond her breath. Nyman watched her, with that stereotyped smile of his, quiet and quizzical, and nothing but the slight tremor at the corners of his mouth showed the effort it cost him to play his part. And that he was playing it well, she herself was affording him ample proof. He would see if he could not still improve on it.

"Now that was extremely foolish of you, Malka," he said lightly. "Why on earth didn't you give me a hint that I wasn't wanted? Look at all the aggravation you might have saved yourself."

"Ah, but that was just what made me hate you most of all," she broke forth again. "Could I not see that it was you who were the link between us? He only came because you brought him. If you had gone away, he would have followed you. I could never have kept him with me through my own endeavour. You were an evil, odious necessity. Oh, how it fanned the flame of my hatred to a blaze to see how ready and subservient he was to you, and how grudgingly he doled out to me the words, the looks which I held more precious than all the jewels in the world. It was always you first, and I had to content myself with your leavings. And so the golden hours went away, wasted and profitless, and—oh, God!—many and many a time I have thought of them—and cursed you!"

He stepped back, startled out of his fictitious self-control.

"You cursed me, Malka—you cursed me? Oh, no wonder, then, that things went so crookedly with me."

"Yes, yes, I see now. I made a mistake. I should have reversed the thing. It is you I should have prayed for, and him I should have cursed. Then perhaps yours would have been the brilliant destiny, and his the downfall. You would have stepped up to the high places where whoever cared might have followed you, and he would have come back here to lay his battered head in my lap and ask me to stroke it well again. Crippled, bleeding, wrecked, he could have come—what mattered it, as

long as he came at all? And now, because I prayed for him, he is back in all his strength and all his beauty. Oh, wasn't that something worth while praying for? And just now my wicked, perverse tongue talked of cursing him—cursing him, my Baruch!"

Nyman had at last left off smiling. He had achieved all he needed. Just one more turn of the screw, and then they could both step down from the rack.

"Quite so, quite so, Malka. But isn't it a pity that all this beauty and strength you prayed so hard for should now go to some one else?"

But this time he nearly overshot his mark. He saw the wild look she darted at the long dagger-like shears on her little table, and his arm crooked warily to intercept the threatened thrust. It would have been as good a way out of it as any, but he was not ready for it. He was here merely to gain the provocation he still required—she could do nothing else for him. Oh, he was safe enough. The dagger mood had passed as swiftly as it had come. People with tears in their eyes meditated no murder.

"Nyman, is it really true?" she asked, with a sob.

"As true as you wish it were not true. As true, Malka"—he paused to give more weight to his words—"as true as it is that you will always hate me."

"Then it is indeed true."

He drew a deep breath. Oh, the luxury of knowing that the worst had done its worst!

"What are you waiting for? Go," she said coldly.

"I am going. But first your hand."

"My hand to you? Never!"

"Your hand, I say, Malka."

Strangely cowed by his masterfulness, she held out her hand. It was his first victory over her, and, presumably, his last. But it was sufficient—he had redeemed his manhood. Perhaps if he had always kept that in view. . . . But it was much too late now to begin saying "perhaps"—much, much too late.

CHAPTER XIX

NYMAN waited about outside the house for a little while, instead of hurrying back to his post—not to watch what turn developments would take, but to see the expected happen. He knew quite well what Malka would do now. It was in full accordance with his anticipations that a minute or two later he saw her room being plunged in darkness by the extinguishing of the candle. A moment after she herself was down in the street, her head hooded in a shawl, which, from the close sultriness of the evening, could not be so much a measure of protection as of precaution. She hurried on, looking neither right nor left, in the direction of Government House. All this Nyman had foreseen. It was a matter of course that she would go to find Baruch and learn the facts from his own lips, and, probably, make a scene. But that was Baruch's business—he need not interfere with that, thought Nyman. Giving her a fair start, he followed her furtively up to the point where the road branched. There he struck off down to the ferry, leaving her to go her own way. It was just as well that she should keep Baruch occupied, and distract his attention for a little while. That would leave Nyman free to do those other greater

things he had to do for Baruch. It was down at Ditomar ferry that the tangle of Baruch Volkmann's fate should be unravelled.

But Nyman, despite his feeling of conviction on the subject of Malka's errand, was wrong—utterly wrong. Malka had not gone to Government House to find Baruch and make a scene. What would be the use of that? she asked herself, as the suggestion flitted across her mind. She knew well enough that what Nyman had told her was the truth. If she required any confirmation of it, she had only to look into her own heart. She found there the rankling recollection of the night when she had spied upon them talking so earnestly on the verandah, and the act of homage with which he had marked the close of that secret colloquy. The jealous stab she had felt on seeing him kiss her hands assured her that it had been no mere courtesy salute. Then there was Karol's story, and the yet more definite evidence of the mutely vague understanding which she, in common with the baroness, had observed between the two. Oh yes, it was true enough. She had lost Baruch, at any rate for the time being—for ever, perhaps, unless she took the one course still open to her to win him back for herself. It was a desperate course, but he had brought it on himself. He had never taken the trouble to study her, to get an insight into the complex mechanism she called her heart. Otherwise, he would have known that she would not sit tamely by and see her sole chance of happiness in this life slipping out of her reach without a struggle.

And a struggle it should be—she could not do less, if she wished to show him that he really stood for so much to her as she professed. She owed it not to her love, but to his prestige that she should fight for him. And, having made up her mind to fight, why should she be fastidious in the choice of her weapons?

Once more, as on that verandah night, she stood crouching among the mulberry bushes beside the gateway from where she could command a safe and unimpeded view of the whole courtyard. She knew by now enough about the habits of the inmates of the house to feel sure that she would not have to wait in vain. It was here that the dragoon officer strolled every evening after supper, wrapping himself in clouds of smoke as he puffed furiously at his cigarettes, of which he sometimes consumed three at a time. Malka had often laughed at the obviousness of his manœuvre in taking these solitary walks. It was to lure his Cousin Alma into joining him. But Cousin Alma never came, and the impotent expectancy which contorted his face into grimaces of rage had been a source of much quiet amusement to Malka watching him from one of the many dark windows that overlooked the courtyard. But to-night she did not feel greatly inclined to laugh—not if she were to see him again, as she had seen him once, shake both his fists threateningly in the direction of the drawing-room, where, presumably, he expected Mademoiselle Alma to be. Where was he to-night of all nights? He had not gone away yet, because she

had seen him come swaggering down the street only that afternoon, and, as usual at his approach, the street had become empty and deserted as if by magic. Perhaps he had gone into the house for another supply of cigarettes. She had counted as many as forty of the paper mouthpieces littering the ground one morning. Well, she would wait. If he did not come before, she would wait till he had gone to his room, and throw stones at his window to attract his attention. Hush—here came some one. Not he, though—her heart leapt—yes, it was he, after all. No wonder she had almost failed to recognize him. His gait was so different from what it was at other times. It did not, as mostly, drag in its measured sullenness—it was sharp and staccato, and he walked with a sideways turn of his head, like a man who has some fear dogging him. Malka stole out from the bushes and called him softly.

He paused with a little jump, and then stepped quickly and resolutely up to her. When he saw who it was he gave vent to a brutal oath.

“Oh, it’s you, is it? More of them, by the devil’s hoof—as if I hadn’t enough on my hands already. If you love yourself, go away. I can’t be bothered with you—baggage!”

She battled down her fear and indignation.

“But, your honour, I only want a very few words with you,” she said pleadingly.

“I tell you I can’t be bothered. I know it’s about that St. Petersburg arrangement. Make up your mind to it—that’s all off. No St. Petersburg

for you. Stick and rot where you are. Lord, to think of the handful I've already got waiting for me there ! ”

“It's not about St. Petersburg, your honour.”

“Then in the devil's name what is it ? ”

“It's about Mademoiselle Alma.”

“Oh, about her—what about her ? ” he asked, becoming at once attentive and alert.

“Your honour confided to me that you were greatly attached to her.”

“Did I ? I suppose I did. I'm fool enough for anything. Well, what has it got to do with you ? ”

“You also were good enough to inform me that Mademoiselle Alma did not appreciate the compliment as much as she should.”

She saw him clench his fist and half raise his arm, and hurried on.

“I only mention these things, your honour, because I could, perhaps, show your honour a way of improving your suit with Mademoiselle Alma.”

“The devil you could ! ” he exclaimed eagerly.

“If, as you seem to think, Mademoiselle Alma has given her more tender regard to Mr. Volkmann, she might possibly change her views if she knows that Mr. Volkmann is a Jew.”

He clapped his hands together with a gesture of mingled astonishment and triumph.

“Volkmann a Jew, did you say ? ” he cried.

“Your honour may take my word for it,” she assured him, coming a little closer to him in her

eagerness to carry conviction. "He was born in this very town. We were children together. His father lived in the second house of the street off the market-place, and was a shoemaker by trade. There are hundreds of people here who could prove it."

"A Jew—and the son of a shoemaker." Karol chuckled exultantly. "Oh, this will be glorious news for my charming Cousin Alma!"

"Will you tell Mademoiselle Alma?" she asked quickly.

"Oh dear me, no," he replied, with a louder chuckle. "I'm going to keep the secret all to myself. And when I feel that there is any danger of my exploding with it, I shall hie myself to the forest and dig a hole there and shout into it till I feel better—like the old fool did in the fable."

The malignant smile broadened on his face as he stood revolving the thing in his mind, clicking his tongue with delight.

"That was all, your honour," said Malka, anxious to get out of his reach now that her mission was safely accomplished. "I won't waste any more of your honour's valuable time."

"Oh, don't leave me like that, my little Song of Songs," he said reproachfully. "If you do a man a favour, don't do it as if you were throwing a dog a bone. I was a bit rough to you before, wasn't I? Now, don't take any notice of that. Fact is, I've got a nagging little business on hand which is giving me considerable worry. But you'll see that I'm not ungrateful. As soon as my own little trouble at

St. Petersburg is over, I'll send for you—hanged if I don't. Upon my word, I'll line 'em all up before you, all the smartest, dashingest chaps I know, and you'll have the pick of the lot—hanged if you won't."

"Your honour is very kind," she broke in, wondering whether he could see her cheeks flaming through the darkness.

"Not at all, not at all, my Queen of Sheba," he replied, with a fatuous gesture of magnanimity, "although they do say in the regiment that I've too keen a sense of obligation, and thereby lower the tone of the service. However, a time comes when we all must suffer for our virtues, doesn't it? And now, my Song of Songs, just once more, to see that I've got the grip of the thing all right: a Jew, born here, the son of a shoemaker, second house in the street off the market-place, hundreds can prove it—is that right?"

"Perfectly, your honour."

"Very good. Then, with your Majesty's permission, I shall take the auspicious news to Cousin Alma, now that I've had my bite out of them. Live and let live, that's my motto."

He hastened off, only just in time to escape seeing her sway back into the mulberry bushes half fainting with a sudden rush of self-disgust and a poignant sense of her treachery. Only now, when it was all over, did the full knowledge of the incredible thing she had done come home to her. She had leagued herself with Baruch's enemies. She, she of all people, had furnished them with the means of

working for his harm and undoing. She tore the shawl from her neck ; it was stifling her. The fresh evening breeze, playing full about her throat, revived her. She threw back her head and kept it high in token of her obdurate impenitence. No, she regretted nothing. Had he treated her as anything but as an enemy ? He had spurned the devotion which she had so jealously hoarded up for him all these years ; he had turned her heart, that should have been a garden of flowering hopes, into a wilderness of wasted love. And, even now, she was seeking apologies for herself when she should more fitly sing the praises of her courage and unbending purpose. Yes, she should sing—she should be merry, for she had done the greatest thing she ever would do. She had ruined the man she loved, to prove how much she loved him. And, taking herself at her word, she gave voice to her triumph in snatches of hysterical laughter which woke defiant echoes all along her desolate route.

Karol's cheerfulness was perhaps more genuine, if less demonstrative, as he made his way back into the house in search of Alma. His eyes were bright with the flame of gratified malice, and he stepped high as if to avoid treading literally on the prostrate body of his antagonist. Presently he came face to face with his cousin in the empty smoking-room. He was not sure, but she gave him the impression of having been waiting there for him.

"Oh, I've been looking for you, Cousin Alma," he addressed her airily.

"And I for you, Cousin Karol," she replied.

"Oh, have you indeed? That's nice," he said, but nevertheless somewhat taken aback by the coincidence.

"Yes," she continued quietly. "I find I have done you an injustice, and I want to apologize to you."

"Oh?"

He had ample cause for the dubiousness of his exclamation, for neither her tone nor her manner seemed very apologetic.

"When you took Krax out for a stroll this afternoon," she addressed him, fixing a hard straight glance at him, "I thought you had done it to track me down and to find where I had gone to with Bor—with Mr. Volkmann. I have since discovered that all you were in search of was that lost letter of yours."

"Ah, then Volkmann told you," he cried quickly.

"Mr. Volkmann has not told me anything. I only got to know about the letter when the gardener's wife brought it to me. She had found it in one of the cactus beds, where the wind had probably blown it. I have much pleasure in returning to you your property."

Karol had turned a trifle pale, but did his best to retain his sangfroid.

"This can hardly be my letter, Cousin Alma," he replied, taking it nevertheless and crumpling it, as though inadvertently. "The one I lost was in an envelope."

"The gardener's wife explained that. Her little boy got hold of the letter from the table where she had for the moment placed it, tore the envelope to bits, and was about to do the same with the enclosure, when she noticed and rescued it. You see there's a slight rent in the left top corner. Of course, she apologized profusely."

"Well, since it is my letter," laughed Karol, uneasily, "I may as well take it and say thank you for it. It isn't of the least importance to me."

"Isn't it? It seems to be very important," she said icily.

"Then you've read it?" he shouted.

"Only part of it, Cousin Karol."

"And, pray, what sort of conduct do you call that?" he continued, losing all his self-control. "Was it considered the proper thing where you were brought up to read other people's letters?"

"My dear Karol," she replied calmly, "this was one of the accidents against which not all the best breeding in the world can protect one. Besides, if you like, you can complain about my lack of manners to mamma. But I hardly think you will quite do that, will you?"

He glared at her, his impotent rage robbing him of speech.

"Still, my dear Karol, if after the gardener's wife's explanation of the missing envelope, which really started all the mischief, you are still capable of listening to another explanation, I will tell you how I came to read your letter. When it was handed

to me, my eye caught the opening words—‘My darling husband.’ Incautiously I jumped to the conclusion that it was one of the letters mamma had written to papa when we were travelling two years ago. I know papa, like the dear he is, has kept them all. I thought that somehow or other this one had got loose. There was also some similarity in the handwriting to strengthen my error. So, getting more and more puzzled by the unfamiliar allusion to things I knew nothing about, I read on and on, until it flashed on me that I was blundering blindly into one of your secrets. Accept my sincere regrets. Accept also my cordial congratulations on your possession of a, no doubt, charming wife and an equally charming little daughter. I was rejoiced to find that she had cut her first tooth painlessly.”

“It’s nothing, I tell you. An ordinary entanglement,” he said sullenly. “I packed her off to Paris, where I thought she was fulfilling a long engagement at the Olympia; but, instead, it seems she has come back to St. Petersburg and has learnt my address here.”

“But why does she style you her husband?”

“She insisted on going through some sort of a ceremony. But what does that matter? Even if she can prove it binding, it would always be easy enough to square her with a thousand or two.”

“Would it really?” asked Alma, with apparent interest.

He fell into the trap.

“Now, please, don’t take any notice of that

stupid letter, Cousin Alma," he said earnestly. "Upon my word of honour, I don't care a rap for her. Upon my word of honour—you know I'm not very free with my honour—the only woman I care for is yourself."

"Well, Cousin Karol, that being the case, it wasn't so very much out of place that I should know something of that letter, was it?" she asked, with an enigmatic smile.

"Oh, I don't mind your reading her silly scrawl," he replied, now completely off his guard. "You are welcome to read all my correspondence, every scrap of it. Everything that is mine is yours. You have only to ask me for a thing——"

"Well, Cousin Karol, I shall test your professions. I shall ask you immediately to do something for me."

"What is it?" he cried, overjoyed.

"To write a letter to me. It need not be a long one."

"Why, certainly; that's too easy, Cousin Alma. When shall I write it—now?"

"No, not to-night. To-morrow will do."

"Well, then, to-morrow," he agreed obediently. "And won't you give me a hint what it is to be about?"

"I only just want you to say that you have arrived safely at St. Petersburg."

"But I shall not have arrived at St. Petersburg!" he exclaimed, completely fogged.

"Oh yes, you shall. If you take the half-past

twelve train to-night from Ditomar, you will be there by midday to-morrow," she suggested quietly.

"In other words, you are asking me to leave the house," he snarled, divided between apprehensive rage and fatuous incredulity.

"I am doing it more tactfully than your uncle might have done," she said significantly. "There will be no difficulty in your getting away. The evening post has just come in. It has brought you an urgent message from your Colonel that you are to return to the regiment immediately."

"So even we great souls of honour do not shrink from fabricating lies," he sneered.

"Oh, Karol, Karol, how could you do this to me?" she cried, her eyes hard and dry, but the tears trembling in her voice instead. "How could you think of degrading me to this? Consider what would have happened if I had loved you. You would have been content to make me your mistress, for, divorce or no divorce, I should never have looked on that other woman as anything but your lawful wife. And you are not ashamed after that to continue to plead your love for me."

He listened to her rebuke, sisterly in its gentleness, but it awoke in him no responsive softness, no atoning penitence. The only rebuke he felt was a furious self-reproach for the clumsiness with which he had managed the situation. Why had he allowed her to go so far? All the wind had been taken out of his sails. Whatever he retorted to her now would seem in the nature of an anti-climax, a tag of puerile

spite. Still, even with the blunted point he would see that the stab proved deadly enough. He stepped close to her, and she did not flinch.

"Now, if the choice were given you, Cousin Alma—just as an academic question, mind you—whom would you sooner have for your husband, that bigamist cousin of yours, or the son of a shoe-maker Jew?"

"What makes you say such a mad thing?" she asked, puzzled and ill at ease.

"Because I am the one and Volkmann is the other."

By a superhuman effort she kept herself steady and erect. Those balefully prying eyes should not see what they so ardently wished to see.

"Whatever Mr. Volkmann may be, I shall feel nothing but the highest respect for him," she replied quietly.

"Yes, that's right. You may respect him as much as you like, but you shall not marry him."

She flashed him a glance that swept the mocking smile from off his face.

"Is it for you to dispose of whether I marry Mr. Volkmann or not, Cousin Karol?"

"In the first instance, I admit, it is a question for your father," he returned insolently. "But should he give his consent—which, by the way, I rather doubt—I want you to recollect that there are others who have the honour of counting themselves as members of your family, and who will not permit

the stigma of being cousined by a Jew to remain on them for very long."

"Karol," she replied slowly, for greater emphasis, "and I want you, as a member of my family, to recollect that I shall not be afraid to let my husband, whoever he may be, meet any gentleman who may demand satisfaction from him, because then I know it will be a fair fight. There will be no shooting from behind."

He cowered back like a whipped cur at the shock of her insinuation. Then, opening the door to pass out—it was more like taking to flight—he flung back at her—

"You must have the devil in your pay."

"And your train leaves Ditomar at half-past twelve," was her reply.

Then she sank into a chair, weary and spent. More she could not endure. Karol, she told herself, had taken his dismissal too tamely. Had he stayed a minute longer, had he insisted on treating the matter as a joke, she might have gone down on her knees to him and begged him to drive home the advantage to which the news he had brought her entitled him. Yes, the bigamist cousin had things very much in his favour over the son of the shoemaker Jew! If only he had had the inspiration to clinch his superiority there and then, she would have let him take her, aching heart and all—but even that would have been better, even his odious grip upon her would have been better than this jostling among the throng of phantasmal uncertainties which had

sprung up out of nothing as at the touch of some malevolent magician's wand. . . .

Gradually, and with occasional relapses, the fierce frenzy of despair to which she had surrendered herself passed away. All was not lost yet. Her father loved her, she reminded herself. Even Volkmann's deceit, implied in his reticence concerning his Jewish origin, turned into an omen for good. At last she had discovered one flaw, one blemish in this paragon among men. There seemed in it a vague guarantee that fate wished her well. She could put forth this one shortcoming of his as a sacrifice to appease the all-too-envious gods.

CHAPTER XX

THERE was no moon, but the star-studded heavens sent a sort of luminous haze down upon the river-bank, giving Nyman sufficient light for the work upon which so much of his self-appointed task of playing providence to his friend Baruch depended. He had pulled the huge ferry-barge halfway out of the water and had careened it over on its side—a marvellous feat of bodily strength. With the stout gimlet which lay on the ground beside him he had bored four holes into the stern, marking out a square about a foot in size, one side of which he had already cut three-quarter way through with his adze. It was hard, and yet delicate work, for if his implement broke he had no other to take its place, and the sweat streamed copiously down his face more from apprehension for his tool than with the exertion of his toil. Nevertheless, he crooned cheerfully to himself in his harsh unmelodious bass, and every quarter of an inch of progress he punctuated with a little whoop of satisfaction.

He felt so cosy here in his solitude, so safe. All the world had gone to sleep, leaving him to manage its destinies, and, judging from his own sense of contentment, he was managing them exceedingly

well ; at any rate, the destinies of Ditomar. What a change for the better, apart from the benefit to his friend Baruch, he was working in them. Tomorrow Ditomar would not recognize itself. He, fortunately or unfortunately, would not be there to see the new face it bore, and therefore it was only fair that he should take his share of gratification in advance. Fair, too, it was that he should work himself up into his present ecstasy of self-approval, for no one but he would ever give him the full credit for what he had done, because no one would ever know the full extent of his achievement. Some, perhaps, might even pity him—amongst them probably his friend Baruch. He laughed at the thought. Baruch would be very great. He would go further and further—as far, perhaps, as any man could, or should, go. But one thing he would never, never be able to get away from, however far he went—namely, that the beginnings of his new thread of life were held in the masterful clutch of a dead man's fingers. Nyman was the charioteer, Baruch the team racing to the winning post beneath an alien control. Who was the greater—who was the more to be envied, the driver or the driven ?

He had cut another inch. He was getting on, he would finish in good time. Yes, it was easy to work when the mere work done was its own guarantee of success. What a godsend had been this idea to which he was now giving a practical effect ! How cunningly it harmonized all the complexities of the various issues with which he had to

deal. After all, physical, elementary methods were the most reliable. He would leave psychological experiments to his friend Baruch. Had he still the right to call him friend after what he had said to him? It was the one question left to give a fillip to his curiosity. Nothing else mattered now. He stretched himself with a luxurious sense of well-being. It was very pleasant here, very cosy and lonely and safe. He felt so fresh and alert, although it was many a night since he had known the restorative blessing of sleep. Never mind—to-morrow he would make up for it. To-morrow he would sleep so soundly that the most somnolent hog would appear a marvel of wakefulness compared to him.

He gripped his implement more firmly and set to work again. Not too much dreaming now—he could leave that for to-morrow. Ah, what was that? He lifted his head, keen as some springbock taking the scent on a jutting mountain-ledge. Yes, he thought he was not mistaken. Here were footsteps—and here was Baruch, come to answer that one last question. Nyman almost shouted with joy. What greater earnest could he have that now he might consider his life complete?

Volkmann had stopped before him, his breath coming quickly. It was evident that he had made his way here at a great pace.

"I couldn't let the opportunity slip by, Nyman," he began. "The others have all gone down to the station to see the dragoon off. I couldn't rest till I had seen you again."

Nyman made no reply, but with his foot thrust the gimlet out of sight. The movement attracted Volkmann's attention.

"What are you doing?" he asked, pointing to the barge.

"Mending my man-of-war, can't you see?"

"It looks more like making a hole in it."

"Well, perhaps that's my way of mending it."

"Ah, yes, I can believe that," said Volkmann, with a sigh. "You seem to have lost the faculty of discerning between mending and destroying in other things as well. In our friendship, for instance."

"Save your sentiment for de Koratoff's daughter," said Nyman, roughly.

"I haven't come for sentiment—I have come for justice," said Volkmann, taking his tone from the other. "I want you to take back the unjust words with which you thought fit to wound me to-day."

"Ah, now I see that you are cut out for a great man," replied Nyman. "You are acquiring the last requisite of greatness—vanity. You want to stand well in every one's opinion, even in mine."

"Nyman, for the love of heaven, make an end of your cynical self-abasement," Volkmann cried passionately. "I admit I want to stand well in your eyes. I will even go so far as to say that the applause of the whole world will not compensate me for your censure, and especially your undeserved censure."

"Are you sure it was undeserved?" asked

Nyman. There was a little more softness in his voice.

"At any rate, I did not expect you to think as you did," said Volkmann, still hotly. "Mean and petty minds, perhaps, to whom everything is base because they would sooner have it so, would have put on my action the construction which you suggested. And so I have come to you to withdraw it."

"Why should I?" asked Nyman, turning a little to one side.

"For two reasons. First, because you know me better than anybody else does; and, secondly, because you are you."

"Beware, Baruch—that second reason sounds like flattery."

"I don't care. Let a compliment for once be a truth. Would to God that anything I could do for my people might salve my conscience for the wrong I have done them in cutting myself adrift from them. What I have done or what I will do, must stand or fall by itself. I seek for it in no vicarious atonement. All I want is to save my people, even if they curse me for it afterwards. And, therefore, I have come to repeat to you my offer. I will do nothing without your consent. And that being so, Nyman, remember that in thrusting me away you are taking on yourself a great responsibility. I do not guarantee that my representations, that Alma's entreaties, will turn her father to thoughts of mercy. And yet, it is the only ray of hope which may possibly blaze up into a great light of salvation.

You yourself have nothing to offer in its place. But if you persist in branding me with selfishness, you may sting me into taking you at your word. And then, when the blood of our brothers reeks to heaven, you will perhaps be sorry for your obstinacy."

"What will you do?" asked Nyman, subtly. "Marry de Koratoff's daughter, and keep silent?"

"No; give up de Koratoff's daughter, and keep silent. Unless I stand before him, with his daughter's hand in mine, what would be the use of saying anything? What hold, what claim should I have on his consideration? But, Nyman, before you consent to my giving her up—think again."

An exultant cry broke from Nyman.

"By God, Baruch, you're a man!"

"Keep your praise—all I ask from you is to let me have justice!" exclaimed Volkmann.

"I can't do that now, Baruch."

"Why not now?"

"Because you have not left me words. I must wait till they come back to me."

"You are playing with me. When shall I have your apology? Remember, time presses."

"You shall have it to-morrow, Baruch," replied Nyman, his voice tremulous but clear. "To-morrow I shall make you amends in tones as loud and unequivocal as you yourself could ever desire. The coming day, Baruch, will bring to your ears a pæan to our friendship which will re-echo through all your remaining life. Will that content you?"

"Do you promise me that, Nyman?"

"As solemnly—as though I were on my death-bed," was Nyman's deliberate reply.

"Then give me an earnest of it now."

He opened his arms wide, and Nyman responded unhesitatingly to the call. He even retained his hold after the other had shown signs of relaxing his. And then, rousing himself to the fact that his fervency might plant suspicions in Volkmann's mind, he pushed him—violently, almost—away.

"And now you must go, instantly. Till to-morrow, then."

Volkmann went without another word. He went quickly, springily, first, because he would not give Nyman time to change from this new softness of his mood back to his customary gnarled ruggedness; and, secondly, because he wished to taste to the full the joy of their perfect reconciliation. Nyman followed him stealthily, till the other's buoyant stride had out-distanced him. Even then he stood sentry for a little while before betaking himself back to his work. He must make quite sure that there were no unnecessary witnesses—especially not Baruch, who was the most unnecessary of all. That dear, foolish Baruch, coming to spur the willing horse, to pour oil on the roaring blaze, and, meanwhile, making him waste the precious minutes. True, it was now only a little past midnight, but the ominous sultriness, the accumulated drought of weeks, which had hung over the land these last few days, torpid and turgid with the weight of its own

inertness, had suddenly, to Nyman's weather-trained instinct, given warning of being stirred into upheavals of portentous menace. Nyman knew he must bestir himself if the end of his task was to outstrip the beginnings of the storm.

And, in the race which ensued, he was the winner. The square was cut out and refixed in the gap, and just as he applied the last thick streak of pine-pitch to conceal the seam of the joinings, the first clap of thunder made the country-side rock to its foundations. It was followed by a fierce zigzag flash, and then the heavens opened in a cloud-burst of tropical violence. Nyman did not move an inch to seek shelter. Sitting astride on the up-turned barge, he let the rushing rain soak into his very bones, revelling, luxuriating in a transport of galvanic exhilaration. The artillery of the skies was music in his ears, but more greedily still he drank in the sound of quick-firing musketry, as the monster rain-pellets impinged crackling against the river's surface. It was just what he wanted. The river would run to-morrow swollen and fierce, headlong and overmastering in its doubled volume and torrent-like bulk. From such a river one could expect anything. The thunder should roar more loudly, the sluices of the heavens open wider yet. It seemed to him he was prolonging the fury of the tempest by the very force of his will.

It was two hours and more before the storm abated, and even then it was with a feeling of discontent that Nyman saw the disordered elements

settle back into their normal state. He was afraid that in the lull which followed, his own inner ferment would assert itself mightily by contrast and carry him off his feet. For, although his preparations were now complete, there was the hardest part of his undertaking to be got through yet—the waiting. But he bore the ordeal far better than he had expected. He bore it with the complacent patience of the starving man, who, at the end of his fast has been promised a sumptuous repast. By-and-by the pall of massive murkiness grew rarer overhead, shimmering out at last into faint patches of amber on the horizon to the east. Then the dawn came on rapidly, broadening apace into the radiance of the sunrise that gave promise of a brilliant summer's day. The smell of the rejuvenated soil rose up in delirious exhalations, intoxicating all things, living and inanimate, with a new joy of life. Only the river still swirled on, gloomily, sullen, and fierce, impervious to all the glint and glamour and melody of the world. Nyman saw it and was glad. The river, his inveterate enemy, he had never loved it till now. For once it had become his friend.

When it got to be between six and seven, he received plenty of company. The daily exodus from Ditomar had begun. By twos and threes came the would-be passengers, the hawkers with their great packs, to make their way across into the wealthier trading district beyond. It would have been false economy to take the road leading to the bridge, for the half-hour's tramp along the difficult

ground, still dank and sodden with the downpour, and frequently interspersed with miniature lagoons, would have left them spent and worn out before they had well begun the day's proper fatigue. But Nyman made short shift with them. To all and sundry he made reply that he must not budge. Not threats nor cajolery nor bribes could move him. He had received strict instructions from his Excellency the Governor to keep himself in readiness for his Excellency's convenience. Would they ever dream of disobeying his Excellency's orders? So they trudged off towards the bridge, grumbling, calling Nyman a mad, lazy rascal, and inveighing against the Evil Will, which, when they had already once in a way made up their minds to spend two copecks, was churlish enough to interfere even with their extravagance. And, as a consolation to themselves, they hoped that the same Evil Will would put it into his Excellency's head to give Nyman no compensation for the fortune of tips he had lost that morning by making him dance attendance on him. And their opinion of Nyman's sanity was by no means improved when he assured them with mysterious conviction that, despite all their wishes to the contrary, he had made full arrangements that for all he had done and had not done, his Excellency should recoup him most handsomely.

It had got towards ten o'clock. Nyman knew that now he was free from interruption till the dinner-hour. Now his Excellency might come. And come he did, very soon after. Nyman leapt

to his feet at the summoning shout from behind that called him to attention. He gave a quick glance at the comer. Good, de Koratoff was alone. It would have made no difference if he had not come alone, but, of course, it was better so. All deference and humility, Nyman held the barge, which was again floating full on the water, in position for the Governor to step in. His arm shook a little, perhaps.

"Will your Excellency be pleased to be seated there?" he said, pointing to the oilskin-covered thwart forward.

De Koratoff shot him a stern, silent look of inquiry.

"The river is running rather strong after last night's rain. It won't be quite safe to stand," explained Nyman.

With a shoulder-shrug de Koratoff sat down. Nyman swung nimbly in after him, and, stemming the huge pole against the bank, pushed off.

De Koratoff sat lost in thought, his chin supported on his closed fist. Then something strange in the movement of the boat drew his notice. He looked up with a start, to see himself in mid-stream, the barge-pole floating in the water alongside. With an exclamation of anger he faced round, and saw Nyman standing behind him, a short, stout cudgel in his hand.

"What's the meaning of this, you dog?" he cried, hoarse with rage. "We are drifting down—we shall be caught in the eddy."

He referred to the whirlpool, which, formed by mysterious natural causes half a mile down the ferry, made that part of the river a terror to navigation.

"The eddy?" repeated Nyman, returning his glance unmoved. "Oh yes, that's exactly where we are bound for, de Koratoff."

"De Koratoff—you hound of a Jew?"

The Governor's face had turned purple, and his hand went flash-like to his pocket. Nyman laughed.

"Save yourself the trouble of looking, my dear de Koratoff," he said dryly. "You haven't got your revolver with you. It wouldn't go into that tight-fitting tunic you're wearing. And even if you had, this would have been first;" and he raised the cudgel threateningly.

"What do you want of me?" asked the Governor, the colour ebbing perceptibly from his face.

"Not much. I only want you to die. Oh, make up your mind. It's got to be—you can't escape it. If you shout—who is there to hear you, or help you?"

And he pointed to the deserted banks with the angry wash of the river dashing itself into froth against them.

"Why do you do this?" asked de Koratoff, having given one last look round to see that he was doomed.

"For various reasons, my friend and enemy. For one, that my late crony, Baruch, may marry your daughter; for another, that my innocent brothers and sisters may not be massacred in their beds; but chiefly, de Koratoff, that I may find my level. You

told me at that memorable interview of ours that you were strongly desirous I should find my level. But, as it happens, de Koratoff, it will be your level too, and I shall be in good company."

De Koratoff listened to him, his brow wrinkling with puzzled thought.

"There is only one thing I understand out of these maunderings of yours," he said slowly. "You have found out—Satan knows how—that I am harbouring some plot against your fellow-Jews here. You wish to kill me to save them. What if I undertake, on condition of your sparing my life, that they should go unharmed?"

"De Koratoff, you are going to die," replied Nyman, imperturbably. "Don't go to your judgment with a lie on your lips. Answer me truthfully, as you hope for mercy, would you have kept your word?"

The Governor turned away, drawing a deep breath, and his face, set as in a vice, showed that he had arrived at his final resolution.

"Very good, then," he said half aloud. "I will die. I deserve to die for having done what I did. I, one of the Emperor's representatives, have haggled for my life with a Jew!"

"That's right—look at it philosophically," said Nyman. "You know as well as I do that within an hour of my bringing you back to land you would have had me chained and hanged. As to my brothers, all those you could have got into your clutch, you would have flayed them singly with your

own hand. You see, that comes of having a bad reputation, de Koratoff. Don't get impatient, we shall soon be there."

They were fast approaching the outer sweep of the eddy.

"Now watch, de Koratoff," continued Nyman—"watch and admire the brilliance of my idea. I had to kill you, but in such a way that no one should be any the wiser, or else your satellites would have required a scapegoat for every hair on your head. You and I and this barge are going to the bottom. You may reappear, I may reappear, but this barge has to stay down—very fortunately for my successor—and your death will be an accident, pure and simple. You said we Jews had no right to study at the universities. Well, the peculiar bent of my genius had to find an outlet somehow—very unfortunately for you. Here we go."

He took two paces backward and stamped once and twice upon the square plug at the stern. With the third stamp he forced it out, and through the gaping orifice the waters came swirling in, filling the boat instantly.

De Koratoff was standing up, drawn to his full height, his arms folded across his broad chest.

"And I did not even kiss my daughter good-bye," he said quietly.

"Don't fret about that—you have left an excellent deputy in my friend Baruch."

And Baruch, the name of his friend Baruch, was the last word Nyman Lichtenberg ever spoke.

CHAPTER XXI

THE Prefect looked distinctly bored as he lounged that afternoon in the drawing-room, turning over the pages of an illustrated back number. Madame de Koratoff intercepted his third yawn. She smiled at him indulgently.

"I don't blame you for feeling dull, my dear Sergei," she said. "Fancy having to get through a day like this with three women on your hands."

And with a sweep of her arm she indicated the baroness and Alma in addition to herself.

"I think I'm missing Karol," replied the Prefect. "The young rascal was, on the whole, very amusing, although his temper was a little uncertain at times. He didn't seem at all pleased at having his furlough cut short in that unceremonious fashion. But I have an idea what his reason for that was."

He nodded with a significant smile towards Alma. The baroness caught the nod, and from her look of displeasure he saw that there had been something inopportune in his remark. He remembered that he had not yet had an opportunity of discussing the young man's abrupt departure with his wife. Alma also ignored the remark, except that her head drooped a little lower over her embroidery.

"Yes, the poor boy seemed very upset," said Madame de Koratoff, with a faint sigh. "And the worst of it was that he left in such a hurry that there seemed absolutely no time for anything."

"What, for instance, mamma?" asked Alma, with rather a sharp ring in her question.

"Oh, for making arrangements about his next visit," replied Madame de Koratoff, who, for her part, had not had an opportunity, or, if she would admit the truth, had not had the courage to discuss her nephew's departure with her daughter. In any case, she felt that this was not the time to dwell on the subject, and that it was best to give the conversation a turn.

"But I think it was very wrong of Paul to leave you like this, Sergei," she proceeded. "He might have postponed his visit to the barracks till next week, when, unfortunately, he will have no more obligations to keep you amused. I must say"—and her face clouded—"that I never like his going to see the garrison officers at any time."

Alma's cheeks grew flushed at this insinuation of her father's gambling habits.

"But, my dear mamma," she broke in warmly, "papa said he had to visit the barracks on business, very urgent and important business—didn't he, Uncle Sergei? You heard him."

"Yes, yes, I heard him say so," assented the Prefect, gravely embarrassed. For at Alma's last remark the door had opened, and Volkmann, entering just then, had evidently taken it in.

"I too can vouch for the accuracy of Mademoiselle Alma's statement ; I also heard his Excellency say so," he observed with a smile, which somehow seemed out of keeping with the tenseness of his voice. "His Excellency also happened to mention to me in passing that he would be back about six."

Alma looked at her watch.

"It's half-past five now. I'm going down to the ferry to meet him," she said, with sudden decision.

"If there is no objection, I will do myself the pleasure of accompanying Mademoiselle Alma," said Volkmann, with a bow which applied indefinitely both to the girl and to Madame de Koratoff.

"Why, certainly you may, Mr. Volkmann," the latter answered readily.

"But you must give me a few minutes, Mademoiselle Alma," said Volkmann, turning from her to the Prefect. "I came to ask your Excellency if you would have the goodness to sign a few letters that should go by to-night's post."

"By all means, Volkmann," said the Prefect, with alacrity.

"We shall meet outside, Mr. Volkmann," said Alma, as she saw him pause for an instant before following the Prefect.

She herself left the room a few moments later, and out in the corridor found the baroness hastening after her. She stopped to give her time to come abreast.

"I shall not detain you very long, Alma," said the baroness, in a low tone. "I only want to ask

you, my dear child, whether you had sufficient reason for sending your cousin away. Of course, you did send him away, didn't you?"

"I did, Aunt Adèle," replied Alma, looking at her frankly. "And you may rest assured that I had ample reason for it."

"So far so good," resumed the baroness. "There is only one other thing I want to say. Did not Mr. Volkmann take your permission to accompany you rather too much as a foregone conclusion? Please don't be angry with me, child—you know I have no one's happiness so much at heart as yours. Still, have you considered all the circumstances of the case?"

"I have considered most of them. The remainder, Aunt Adèle, I hope to dispose of during our walk."

"The remainder—yes. But there may be certain aspects which may escape you," said the baroness, her thoughts dwelling on what she supposed to be her exclusive knowledge of Volkmann's origin.

"There may be," replied Alma, firmly. "You may, however, be sure, Aunt Adèle, that I shall keep well in mind the most important consideration of all."

"And what is that, Alma?"

"That my dear father must be the ultimate arbiter of my fate."

"Ah, in that case I am content!" exclaimed the baroness, with visible relief. "As long as you are satisfied to throw the final responsibility on your

father, I—I am perfectly willing to refrain from joining you two in your walk.”

“Thank you, Aunt Adèle,” Alma replied simply, as she returned the baroness’s cordial embrace.

On stepping out into the garden, she found Volkmann already waiting for her. They began their walk in silence, he looking at her sideways and thinking how much more adorable she seemed in her embarrassment, which he, not unnaturally, set down to the constraint of being alone with him for the first time since the avowal of her love. He was in no hurry to break the silence; it implied for him a delicious intimacy that thrilled him to the marrow. At last his gaze seemed to compel hers, for she lifted her face to his slowly, steadily.

“Dearest,” he whispered rapturously.

She made no reply, but continued to look at him searchingly. The keenness of his joy kept him blunt to the purposefulness of her look.

“Oh, dearest, dearest,” he whispered again, “please let me hear you say that you are happy. You should at least be a little happier than you were yesterday. The shadow of the sword of Damocles that hung over our heads has lifted. I don’t know, I don’t want to know, why Karol has gone from here. I only want to know that your life feels a little brighter from my love.”

“One shadow may have gone—only to give place to another,” she answered, so softly that it seemed she did not care whether he heard her or not.

"What do you mean, dearest—what other shadow?" he asked.

"All secrets are shadows," she said, looking away from him.

In a flash of intuition he guessed to what she referred. Again, as in the mystery of Karol, he felt no curiosity to ask questions, to find out the inwardness of her information. It seemed to him the most natural thing in the world that she should know what he had not told her. The roots of their mutual sympathy seemed to strike so deep into the core of their inmost beings, that they might well communicate all things to one another by mute transmission.

"Why did you think, dear one, that I was going to keep it a secret?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, I knew you would not," she cried, breaking into joy as dry tinder bursts into flame at the touch of the quickening spark. "I knew I had only forestalled you. You will speak—you will tell my father, will you not? Oh, let there be nothing deceitful, nothing underhand in our love. Let it be frank, and unashamed or unafraid of anything, even to the very nakedness of the truth. Oh, Boris, Boris, tell me again that you did not intend to keep this a secret from me."

"I can do more than that Alma mine; I can prove it to you," he replied, glowing at her importunity.

"Prove it to me?" she echoed, with the faintest tinge of disbelief in her voice.

"Listen, dearest. I am only waiting for your father's return to take him into my confidence. It is not a matter of choice that I will tell him of my past, of my antecedents; it is a vital necessity, a reason of life and death. You shall know, dearest, how impossible it was that I should remain silent."

"Oh, more mystery," she faltered. "Why will you not tell me now? Why must I wait till my father returns?"

"You shall not wait till then," he said quickly. "You shall know in a few minutes. I am taking you to see a dear friend of mine. I want you to hear what I have to say to him, and what he has to say to me. Everything will become clear to you from that."

"A great friend of yours?" she asked, wondering. "Ah, yes, of course you were born here—you have old associations." Then she added with a quiet rapture: "Oh, the first time I met you, when we spoke of Ditomar, did we ever dream it would come to this? Oh, you wonderful man!" She paused, her gaze attracted by three Jewish pedlars, who at that moment skulked by with furtive hang-dog glances at them. "To think what you might have been, and what, through nothing but yourself, you are now!"

He smiled proudly, such a smile of pride, perhaps, as that wherewith a king receives his crown. Whatever life might have in store for him, it could offer him no greater triumph than the praise which had just been bestowed upon him. No, none quite

as great, but here he was coming face to face with a moment almost equally supreme—the amends which Nyman had promised him. He thrilled at the prospect of hearing the only man he held dear pay him the tribute due to him, and more precious for having been deferred, in the presence of the only woman he loved. What a happier combination could he have asked of fate? And then the concomitant thrills to be derived from that auspicious meeting! Nyman's admission, grudging and difficult, perhaps, of Alma's worth, his consent, probably no less grudging and recalcitrant, to the amelioration of his lot through Baruch's and Alma's united help; and lastly, and chiefest of all, the gladdening hope,—which Alma, as intermediary, should turn into a certainty,—of averting the impending horror which would otherwise make the remainder of his life a hideous nightmare. In everything, over everything, was Alma—Alma, gracious, propitious, benignant, as her very name implied, adjusting the conflicting issues that centred round unhappy Nyman, his friend, and dread de Koratoff, her father. . . .

There was little else said between them till they were in sight of the river's brink. Volkmann saw at a glance that the place where the ferry-barge had its customary stead was empty. The mark of its broad prow was clearly indented upon the soft bank. Perhaps Nyman was just taking a fare across; but no, the expanse of the river, as far as could be seen to right and left, showed vacant, except for a

rambling raft, loaded with logs, floating lazily down the stream. No doubt the barge had got loose and had drifted a little way down into the forest of water-willows that fringed the sides, and Nyman had gone in pursuit of it. Volkmann was just turning to Alma with tender solicitude to inquire whether the fatigue of making a search would not be too much for her, when the confused hum of many voices, mingling excitement with consternation, came to their ears across the intervening thickets. Volkmann started and turned pale as a fierce spasm of intuition flashed through his mind : something had happened to Nyman—something was wrong with Nyman. Nothing else could have put that abysmal feeling of apprehension into his heart. Alma had run lightly up a neighbouring little knoll, where, as she stood on tip-toes, her gaze could just clear the obstacles between.

“Yes, there are a lot of people over there,” she called to Volkmann. “I wonder what all the commotion is about—a lot more are running down to the river. Shall we go and see?”

“No, dear ; if you don’t mind, let me go alone,” he replied huskily.

“If you wish it,” she assented instantly. “Only don’t stay long. Papa may be back at any moment now.”

He answered the hand-kiss she blew him with a wan smile, and bounded away, his heart beating furiously, as he broke through the twining tentacles of undergrowth that hampered him at every step.

He noted, with increasing fear, that the nearer he came to the scene of the commotion, the fainter and more subdued grew the excited hum, as though the full sense of what had happened were coming home more overpoweringly to the assembled throng. And by the time he had come into the range of vision, it had all died into a frozen hush. A haze was over his eyes, and he could as yet see nothing clearly—only that four men were lifting something to their shoulders, something that was limp and dripped dankly with a sickening air of unconcern. The bearers had begun to move, but Volkmann remained rooted to the spot, rooted all the firmer when he recognized who their burden was. It was only when he saw the direction they were taking and remembered the watcher on the hillock they would have to pass, that he rushed forward across their path with a furious shout.

“You fools, you dolts, why do you go this way? Is there no other road that you can take him?”

They paused for a moment, and one of the men explained with sullen deference that that was the shortest cut to the Government House, and that they would consider it a favour if his honour would permit them to get through with their disagreeable task as quickly as possible.

Volkmann stepped aside and let them pass, falling into rank with the procession mechanically, and with a sense of fatalistic futility which left him to face helplessly the rushing tide of the inevitable. Yes, and here it came, in the shape of the white-clad,

graceful figure hurrying full into their course. He dashed towards her insensately, with a vague idea of stopping her at all costs ; but it was unnecessary, she had halted of her own accord. She had seen all that was necessary for her. She, if any one, should know that gold-braided uniform. She made no moan, she uttered no cry. Only a glassy tenseness came into her eyes. Then, with a sudden movement, she turned and walked along with them, rigid and erect. Oh, that inexorable law of *noblesse oblige* ! The father she loved so much was dead, and she escorted him without a tear. There must be no dishonouring of her grief before the prying, ignoble crowd.

Another thing Volkmann noted. This was the hour, of all others, when she should nestle to him for support, when they should feel their two hearts beating against one another. But instead, they walked apart—as with an invisible presence dividing them.

CHAPTER XXII

AN atmosphere of desolate yet dignified gloom pervaded the Government House the following day. Monsieur de Koratoff's mortal remains now lay in the state reception-room in the full funereal pomp of catafalque and pall and man-high wax tapers, and with all the orders and insignia of his rank and office duly displayed. The servants tip-toed about with frightened, tear-stained faces through the silent corridors, and neither courtyard nor stables showed any sign of their wonted bustle and activity. It was clear that the energetic hand which had set all this machinery moving had irrevocably lost its power.

It was only in the library that one might have come across any indication of a strenuous interest in the affairs of this world. It was there that the Prefect and Volkmann sat engaged in discussing what was evidently a subject of the utmost importance to the two of them. Twice already Volkmann had risen to mark that, for his part, the discussion might be considered at an end ; but on both occasions the Prefect had obliged him to be seated again, and to go over the ground already covered by them *de novo*. But when Volkmann rose for the third

time, the Prefect also got on to his feet, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head in token of his utter resourcelessness. Then, seeing that further speech would be wasted, he placed his hand on the young man's shoulder with a gesture of fatherly anxiety.

"Look here, Volkmann, try the old remedy, twenty-four hours of reflection. It worked once or twice before, you know."

"And therefore I know when it is useless," replied Volkmann, firmly. "I assure your Excellency that I have crowded into the past night more thought than I hope to be called upon to expend in any twelvemonth to come."

"You look it," the Prefect said bluntly, with a swift glance at the other's haggard face and sunken eyes.

"And therefore I would ask your Excellency to do me this one last kindness of taking this as my ultimatum. No, not quite the last," he corrected himself; "as the very last, I would ask you to pass my request on to madame la baronesse."

"Yes, yes, my boy, I shan't forget about that," replied the Prefect.

And before he had time for another word Volkmann had quitted the room, leaving the Prefect in a perfect ferment of agitation, which had by no means subsided when a little while later the baroness looked in on him for a few minutes in the interval of ministering to the helplessly prostrate Madame de Koratoff.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, when he had given her the purport of his interview with Volkmann.

"What am I to think of it?" she counter-questioned him, with a shrug of her shoulders.

"But, for Heaven's sake, Adèle, don't take it in that lackadaisical way," cried the Prefect, hotly. "The thing can't be left like this. You must take him in hand yourself. With your undoubted influence over him, I am sure you will succeed where my own powers of persuasion failed."

"I shall do no such thing," replied the baroness, shaking her head decisively. "Knowing Volkmann as we do, we ought at least to pay him the compliment of not trying to interfere with his decision. To offer him further inducements would be nothing short of an insult to him. He is not a baby to be bribed with lollipops. You ought to know that he must have weighty reasons for this drastic and unexpected step of his, especially when he refuses to state these reasons."

"A fine ending to our holiday," the Prefect cried almost lachrimosely. "De Koratoff dead, and now Volkmann——"

"You might have known, Sergei, that poor Paul's accidental death would only be the precursor to something else; misfortunes never come singly."

"I suppose there is no doubt as to its being accidental," mused the Prefect.

"All the investigations point that way. Volkmann himself took the matter in hand, so you can rely on

its having been looked into thoroughly. Strangely enough, he seems to have been more specially concerned, all last evening and again this morning, with ascertaining the fate of the ferryman, and he has come to the conclusion that the poor fellow has also perished. There is absolutely no trace of him. The boat presumably got out of hand in the violent current, and, having got swept down to the whirlpool you have heard them speak of, was sucked under. They found the pole not very far off entangled in the rushes."

"Ah, well, I suppose there's no other way of accounting for it," sighed the Prefect. "After all, the main fact we have to deal with is that de Koratoff is gone—and Volkmann going. What is to be done, Adèle?"

"To make the best of it," was the quick reply.

"Very well, then. By the way, he begged you to ask Alma to see him for a few minutes. Will you tell her?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know, Adèle, I am beginning to think that, after, all there may be some complication there which may have influenced him in his startling resolution."

"There may or may not be—that can hardly make any difference now," replied the baroness, as she swept out.

Volkmann was keeping his lonely sentry-go in the dining-room, directing frequent glances towards the door through which he momentarily expected

Alma to appear. In his heart a dire struggle for supremacy was being waged by his impatience to see her and his dread of the ordeal which he knew her coming must bring to him. However much he had nerved himself for it, he could not guarantee against a breakdown, a radical upheaval of his painfully achieved determination, till he had it all safely behind him. Among the chaos, into which the unforeseen happenings of yesterday had thrown his soul, one thing stood out firm and unshakable—the reason why he made no attempt to remind her of his existence, of his contiguity during that bitter homeward pilgrimage of hers the day before, the reason why he had not dared to make the attempt. It had thrust itself upon him at sight of de Koratoff's dead face, it had been his constant companion all during his frenzied search for his vanished friend. It flamed upon him, a pointing sword, out of the dark firmament of his baffled life. And all these dread things he would have to say to her when she came !

At last he saw her enter, with a slow, dragging gait, her eyes downcast, and the whiteness of her face, set in sharp relief against her mourning-dress, heightening her clear-cut beauty. It needed all his self-control to prevent him from rushing forward and catching the pathetic, woe-begone figure in his arms. But in all pity for her he dared not strike such a false note, a note so discordant to the issue to which, by racking his heart to its full pitch, he had at last attuned himself. There was also about her—or was it but his fancy ?—a vague air of shrinking and

reticence which seemed to imply that she neither expected nor desired any vigorous demonstration of sympathy and comfort. Slowly, silently he stepped up to her and took both her hands in his, to which she made no demur. It was some moments before he could get himself to speak.

"I know that your mother needs you at her side," he said gently, "but could you not spare a minute to send me a message since yesterday?"

"Heaven have mercy upon me," she replied brokenly, "but, if you will only believe me, I have spared you a great many minutes since yesterday. I have been at work on your message all the time," she added, wearily putting her hand to her head.

"Did it then give you so much pain as all that?" he asked, tightening his grip while softening his tone.

"Not so much pain, I suppose, as having the heart torn from one's breast," she replied, with a dim smile, "but it hurt greatly nevertheless."

"Then let me hear it. Perhaps the telling will ease you."

"Yes, God help me, perhaps the telling will ease me," she said, with quivering lips. "Boris, my message to you is this: we must forget all we have said to one another these last few days by word or by look. We must forget everything, for there is nothing which will ever take away the barrier between us."

Nervelessly he let her hands slip from his. That was the only outward sign of his emotion. But within him there rose up, measuring their strength

against one another, his pain and a grim wonder at the coincidence which made her thoughts run in such accurately parallel lines with his. She did not pause to notice how he took her words, but continued, with but a dry sob that served her in place of catching her breath.

"You will want to know, of course, to what I refer. Or rather, you have probably already guessed it. I am not saying it by way of the reproach which the world—my world—unjustly attaches to the fact: Boris, at one time you were a Jew."

"Your statement is wrong, Alma," he said quietly.

A gleam of hope flashed into her eyes.

"That is, it is wrong to say that I was a Jew," he proceeded unmoved. "Alma, I still am a Jew. Since yesterday I have gone back to my people."

She was again her former wan, hopeless self.

"That hardly makes any difference, Boris," she resumed. "It only adds a few unnecessary inches to the barrier, for the barrier was sky-high even before. Oh, if it but rested with me to raze it to the ground. I should claw at it with my bare fingers until I had made them raw to the blood. But the power is not with me; it has passed irrevocably out of my hands. It is with the dead, Boris. If my father had lived, all things might have been possible. I should have implored him, grovelling at his feet, to give his consent to our marriage; and, stubborn as he was in his hatred of your race—perhaps, perhaps he would have yielded. But what

can I do now? I cannot ask him because he cannot hear me, because he cannot answer me. And his silence means to me refusal. All through my life I should be hearing his dumb rebuke for doing a thing to which I did not have time to reconcile him. I should be haunted by the impotent resentment which I should know him to be feeling in his grave, and, Boris—it is a terrible thought, but I cannot thrust it from my mind—some time or other a little of that resentment might creep into my love for you.”

His face was a mask of judicial calm as he listened. He seemed to be putting her words into a scale and weighing them to a hair’s weight. Then he said—

“Alma, before I speak—are you determined on this?”

“Yes, Boris—and oh, do not reproach me for wishing to keep my love for you intact.”

“Let us leave that out of the question; I have other things to tell you.”

“Yes, yes, tell me,” she urged.

“Only one dim spark of gladness do I see for myself in this dark vastness of my heartache,” he said, clenching his fist as though in open rebellion against the cruel necessity of it all, “and that is, Alma, that the first word of parting has come from you. It is you who said that this must be, not I. It will relieve for me in the future the nagging thought that for what the world might call a quixotic sentiment I have flung away the greatest happiness of my life. Oh, Alma, Alma, now only does it come home

to me how true must be the accord between our hearts, inasmuch as the same thing brings us both, by widely differing ways, to the same issue. Alma, when I asked you to come to me here, it was to tell you for my own part that our paths must lie asunder. And the motive which made that necessary for me—for me, too, Alma, it was your father's death."

"You, too, thought of him dumb and helpless there in his grave!" she cried. "Oh, Boris, Boris!"

"Yes, Alma; only his helplessness bore to me a different meaning," he said, his lips tightly drawn. "But, Alma, before I come to that, I have to strike a long way back. Be patient with me and listen, God knows when you will be listening to me again. I shall be frank, Alma, and you will be glad, for it will kill your love for me quickly and without a chance of its resurrection."

She faced him, at first with the same air of alert distrust she had presented to him in their earlier days of antagonism and cross-purposes. And then, almost in the same breath, she recollected the duty she owed to their plighted, and blighted, troth, and composed herself into an attitude of shamed resignation.

"Your father, Alma, whether wittingly or unwittingly—it is too late to go into details now—had done me a great wrong. I came here, I wormed myself into the intimacy of his house, burning with the thirst for vengeance. I planned to do it by filching your love, by making you subservient to my will, to tie you to me hand and foot. Yes, Alma,

to do you the deadly injury with which your intuition has already reproached me ; and then to fling you back into his arms, a broken, worthless thing. And so I would crush his spirit to the dust."

Her eyes were wide with horror.

"And—and this you intended to do to me?" she stammered.

"Yes, deliberately and of set purpose. And I should have done it, if you had not been too strong for me. As it was, I fell into the snare I had spread for you—it was I that became bound hand and foot. Now, Alma, is your love not dead yet?"

Mutely she shook her head again and again.

"Then let me go on. Once more it came that your father threatened harm to my people. It was then that I finally determined, as my one resource, to claim from him, as the husband of his child, the consideration I could not have expected from him as a stranger. Do you not see, Alma—you still held only the second place with me, you were only the means and not the end. Am I still worthy of your love?"

"Would to God you could argue me out of it!" came from her in a broken cry.

He drew a deep breath.

"And then your father died. His death was to me the finger of God, writing upon the skies in letters of fire, that my people were too great to be beholden to anything less than Providence itself. Not to a cipher like me were they to be indebted for their rescue. The Guardian of His

orphaned children usurped once more His august privilege."

Finger of God—Providence—how else was he to put into words Nyman's deed, the deed to which, through that surprise midnight visit of his, and in the light of after-events, he alone of living men held the clue? Poor, great-hearted, cynical, blundering Nyman, what would he have said of the irony of it, of the ill-luck which made him as great a failure in death as he had been in life? What would he have said had he known that instead, as he thought, of clearing the obstacles from his Baruch's path, he had heaped them all together into one solid wall of insurmountable impossibility? He looked sorrowfully at Alma. Could any one imagine that one so near of kin to that sweet-faced saint had made all this terrible business necessary?

Her next words were in strange apposition to his thoughts.

"I don't quite follow all you say, Boris," she remarked, with quiet sadness. "I think you must be wrong in some things. My father was a good man—he meant no harm to anybody. Oh, Boris, I ask it, I hope it, for your dear sake—have you no stronger reason, no truer motive to help you bear the burden of your renunciation?"

"Yes, Alma—that I have," he replied instantly, touched to the quick by her solicitude. "I have a motive for our parting which is stronger even than yours. There is an unwritten ordinance in our faith that no renegade may come into his own again

unless, as penance and affliction of soul, he leave behind him what has become chiefest and dearest to him in his apostate days. Alma, I am leaving you behind. I am buying my birthright back for the highest price that could be asked of any man."

"Thank you, Boris, for saying that—thank you for comforting me and withal exalting me to the level of what is best in your eyes," she said, her voice vibrating musically like the chords of a harp. And then her tone became strangely matter-of-fact. "What are your plans for the future?"

"To go away from here, Alma, somewhere to the lands of the West. I have already told the Prefect that I am leaving his service, instantly almost. I have no fear for myself. I have a career behind me at an age when other men are only just putting away their school-books."

"Yes, have I not already told you? You are wonderful," she said, gazing at him proudly with moist eyes. One or two tears welled over, but the rest she quickly choked back.

"That's right, Alma," he said, catching her to him with a sudden movement, "don't weep. Ours is an uncommon fate—let us not vulgarize it by common people's ways."

"Yes, Boris, neither by tears—nor by kisses," she said, drawing her mouth away from his approaching lips. "Let us always remember, Boris, that we have never kissed; that we have gone away from one another with our love brimming over to the very edge, and not one drop of it wasted or

spilled. Let ours be indeed an uncommon fate—for the sake of all loving hearts, let it be unparalleled.”

Her trembling hands sought his, and so they stood for some seconds.

“Must it be now?” he asked, as he felt her tight grip gradually growing lax.

“Yes, Boris, now. But, perhaps, not yet for a moment or two,” she added, as an after-thought. “Tell me something, some good, helpful word—nothing savouring of makeshift, self-deception, or of illusive hope, but something sterling and worthy of you that I can cherish when you are gone.”

He pondered for a little while how most fittingly to accede to her request, and then he said, all his soul in his voice—

“I shall try, Alma, to say something worthy of your remembrance. I shall say this to you : It is good that the nations, with their creeds, should remain separate and apart. Every nation has its individual virtues, and from the refining of these in the crucible of time shall spring forth one day the universal republic of God. Every faith has its special truths, and from the sorting of these shall in the end come to light the one great truth which will consummate the joint salvation of mankind.”

“Thank you again, Boris. You have indeed given me a precious keepsake.”

With that she turned, and, stretching out her arms as if to grope her way, she left the room.

He did not see her again, although he did not

leave the house till the evening. The Prefect raised no further objections to his hurried departure. He took his wife's word for it that Volkmann had his reasons. A far more obvious reason, however, Volkmann had for sending his luggage to the railway-station by conveyance and himself getting there on foot. He wished on the way to pass the cemetery for one last look at his parents' graves. To his surprise, he found that he had been forestalled. They already had one visitor. The bowed figure of a woman was sitting by the graveside. He immediately recognized it as Malka's. She gave a cry of dismay as she saw him approach.

"Why, what are you doing here, Malka?" he asked gently.

"Oh, have mercy—don't punish me too hard!" she exclaimed, cowering back from him.

"Who talks of punishing, Malka? I only asked why you are here?"

"Oh, and I thought you had tracked me down. Well, then, I came to pray to your parents that they should ask you to forgive me."

"Forgive you—for what, Malka?"

"For letting my cursed tongue speak of your secret to your enemies."

Partly he understood, partly he guessed.

"Oh, so it was you," he said indifferently. "Don't let that trouble you, Malka. You did me no harm by it; on the contrary, it saved me considerable inconvenience."

And he smiled at her kindly.

She was burning to ask him what he meant, but she did not have the courage. Then he told her of his own accord.

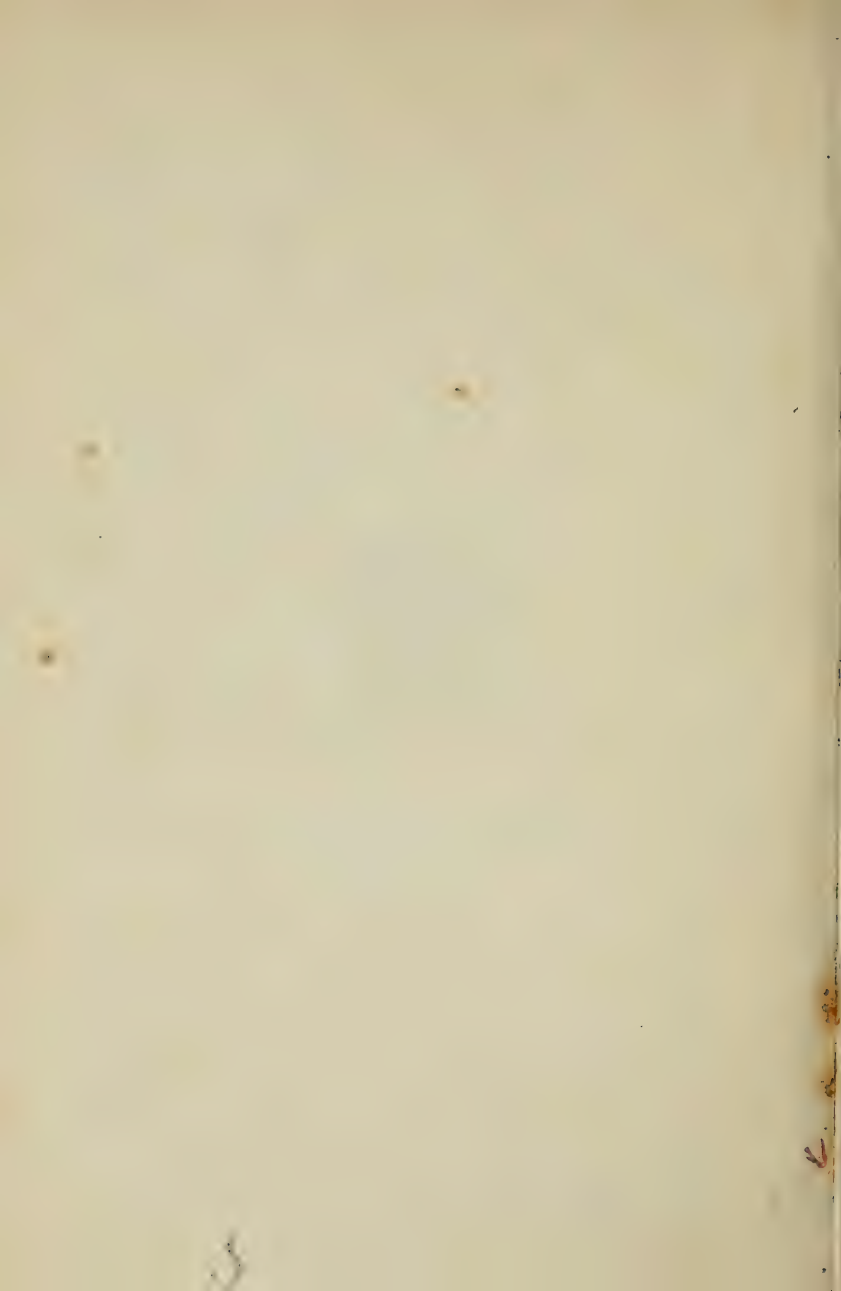
"I am going away from here to-night, and I shall never come back again. Here, please take this. I was going to send it to you by post," and he handed her a pack of rouble notes. "I want you to divide it into three. One-third to pay for Nyman's burial, if he should ever be found ; one-third to hand to the elders to build a wall round this cemetery ; and the last third for yourself to do with as you please. I am glad to have seen you again, Malka. Good-bye."

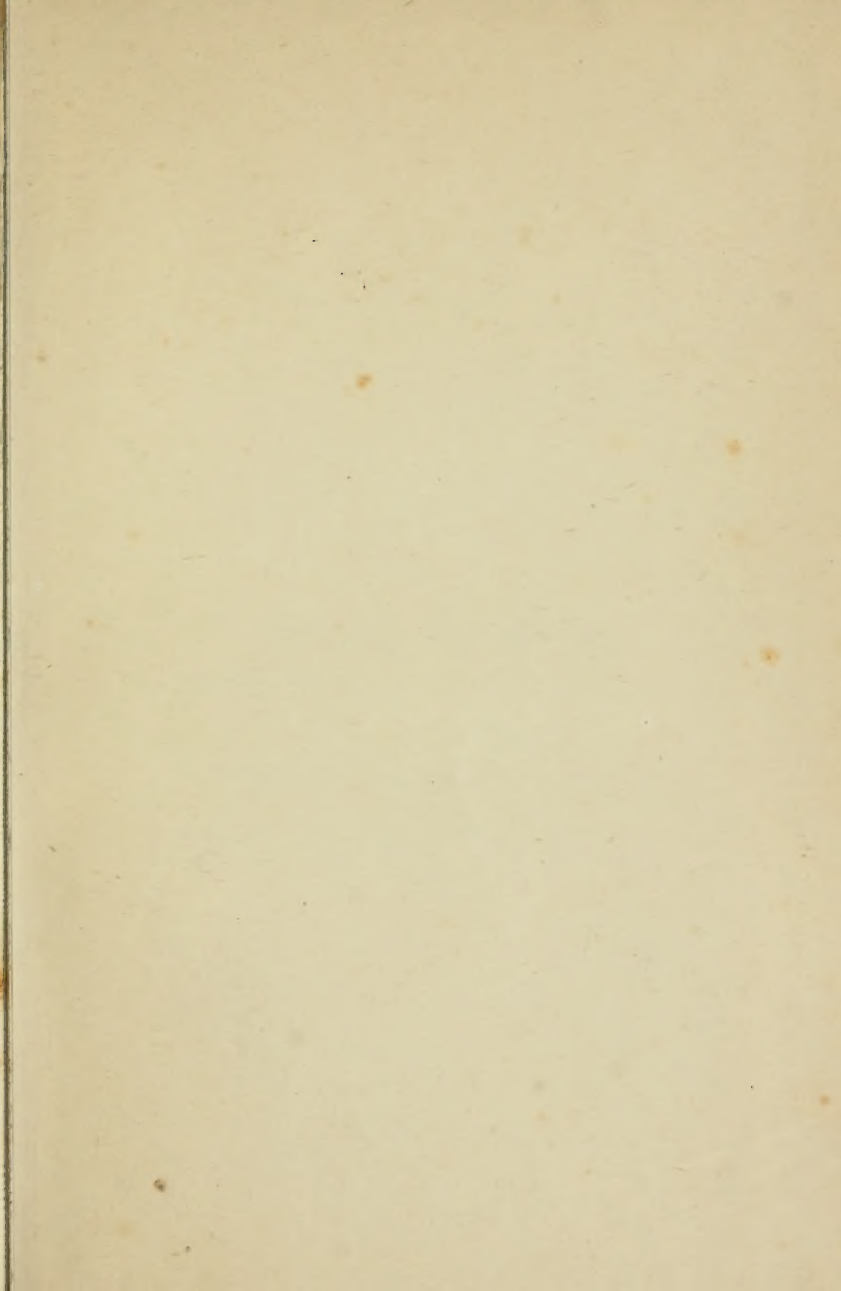
Lightly he brushed her hair with his fingers ; and then, stooping down, he gathered in a handful of earth from the graves and dropped it into his travelling-bag. It was wise to take a talisman with him into the new life on which he was adventuring forth.

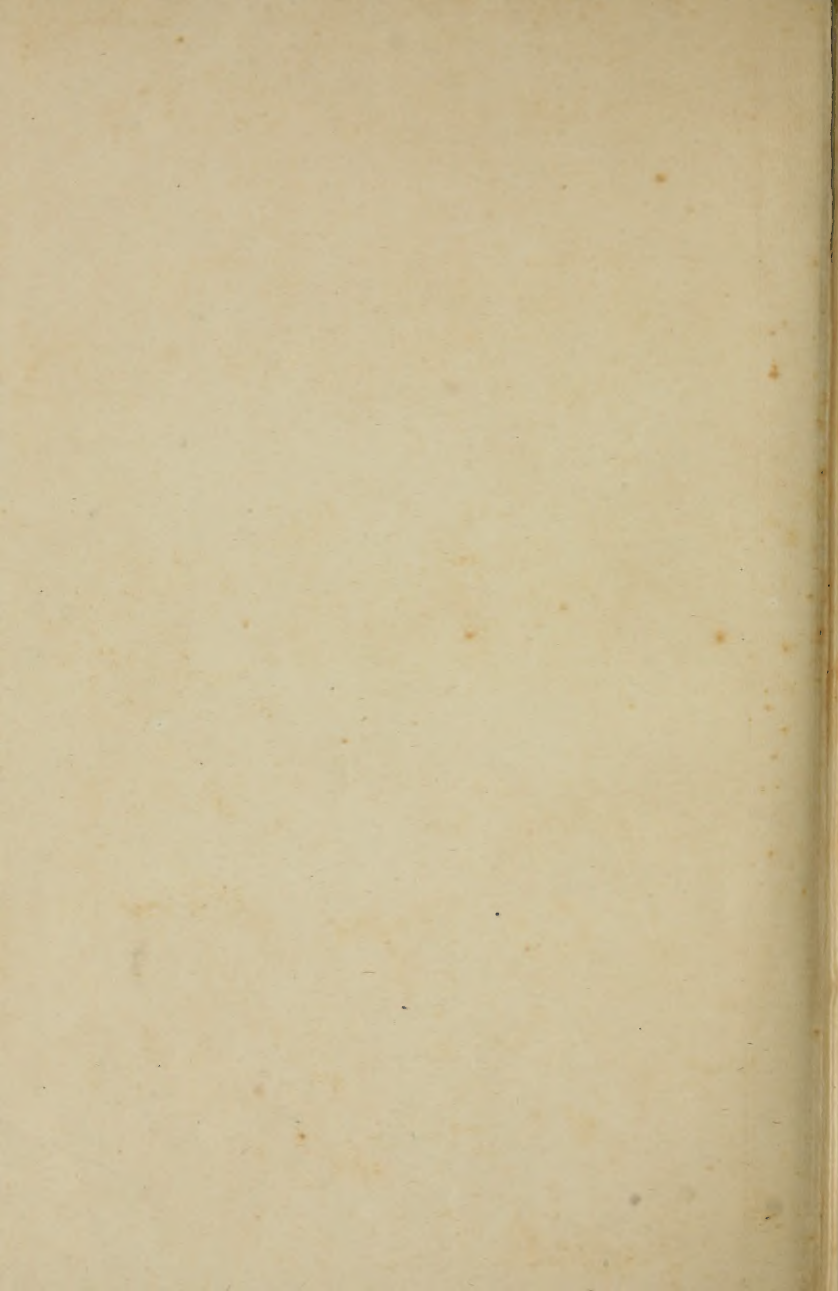
And long, long into the twilight distances of the dusk, there floated the echoes of Malka's sobs.

THE END









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